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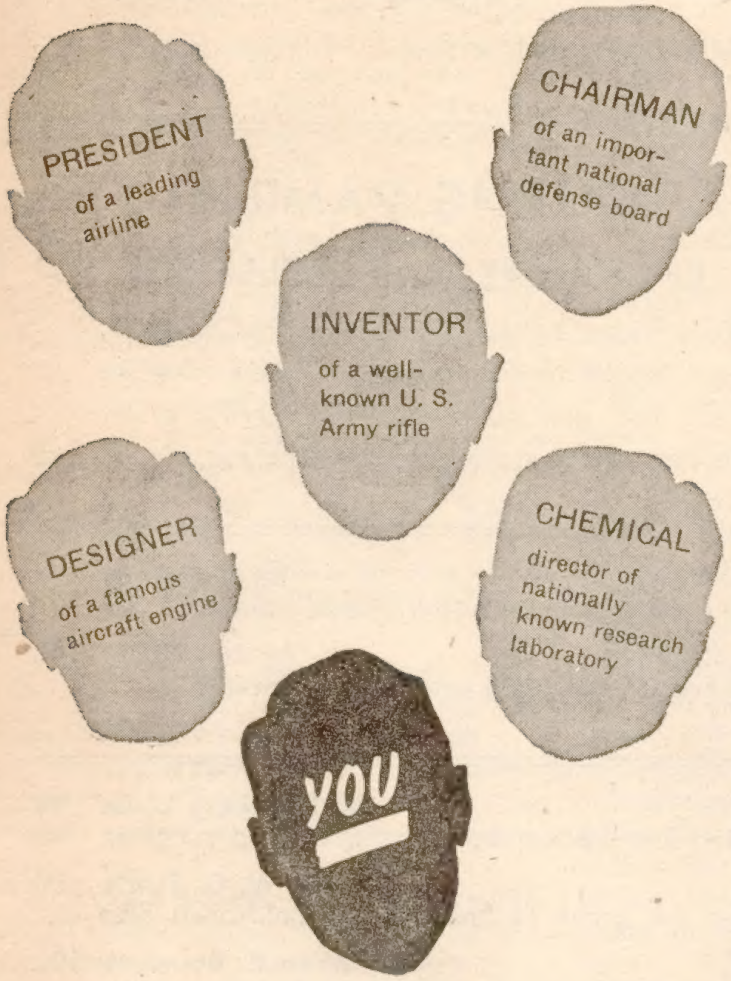

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By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

Tom Frazer, battling foreman of the Double Y, puts loyalty to a pard above the law when he uses fist, gun and rope in a terrific effort to depose the rustler kings of the rangeland! 9

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The Chuck Wagon

Food for Thought from Readers, Writers, Old Hands, Pilgrims—and the Editor

IN THE days of the early mountain men grizzly bears roamed up and down the Missouri. They were huge, fearless and would attack on sight. Their tough hides and thick hair were almost impervious to arrows, and they could fight on with an incredible amount of lead in their systems.

Hugh Glass was one of the earliest of the true mountain men, and almost as tough as a grizzly. Bearded, bony, his body all whalebone and whangleather, the old man peering through the plum brush that morning up on Grand River might have been kin to a bear, himself.

Sent out by Major Henry to bring in meat for his fur-catching expedition, the old hunter from Pennsylvania had found it—an old she bear with three cubs—not three jumps from his nose. Before Glass could fire his rifle the monster was on him with a growl. She tore a chunk of meat from his thigh and tossed it to her cubs. The next morsel she got from his shoulder, and she was biting at his protecting arms in a snarling try for his throat when other men from the Major's party came up and riddled her with lead from their long rifles.

Word was sent back to the Major at the keel, goat, and knowing that he had to get on to the trapping grounds before the beaver holed in for the winter, he decided to leave two men to guard the hunter till he died.

But old Hugh Glass refused to die; the men became panicky at the proximity of hostiles and deserted. They took his knife and rifle when he was asleep and proceeded on foot to Henry's fort on the Bighorn and reported the death of their charge.

When Glass woke up and discovered the two had gone and left him without food or weapons, he vowed vengeance. He dragged himself to the spring so he could drink, and lived on wild cherries and berries till he regained a little strength.

Finally, knowing that he couldn't let winter overtake him there, and that the nearest refuge was a hundred miles away at Fort Kiowa, he set out to crawl, if he had to, that weary distance.

Alone in a land of hostile redskins and wild beasts, he climbed out onto the prairie above the Grand River. Finally he saw a pack of wolves attacking a lone buffalo calf. He watched them while they leaped in and out, snapping at the hamstrings and throat of the helpless youngster.

His throat muscles contracted and the saliva flowed in his mouth as he watched them eat their fill, and when they had swallowed enough, to slacken their hunger, he took the great gamble and crawled over to the calf. The wolves retreated and Glass had his turn. He ate what he could, ripped off as much meat as he could carry inside his shirt and went on, gaining strength as he traveled. At last thinned down to the bone, his clothes in

rags, he reached his destination where he was taken in by the American Fur Company men. His terrible scars bore witness to his otherwise incredible tale.

Who, then, but a mountain man would have refused to stay all winter and rest up? But Glass was of that breed, and he couldn't rest until he caught up with the men who had deserted him. So off he set for the Bighorn with the first boatload of trappers heading north.

They had not gone far when the party was attacked by Arikarees and all killed but Glass who was rescued by a couple of friendly Mandans and taken to Kip's fort. That night the gaunt old man slipped out and started again on his lonely mission.

When he reached the fort at the junction of the Yellowstone and the Bighorn, he found only the younger of the two deserters. This one persuaded him that the other was responsible for the crime. Again Glass took off. After another miraculous escape from Indians he finally tracked down the older man at Fort Atkinson far down the Missouri River.

He found that the man had joined the army, and not wanting to tangle with Uncle Sam, gave up his revenge. One may surmise that old Hugh had a heart as soft as his hide was tough, and that his thirst for vengeance was not as strong as his humanity when it came right down to killing a fellow man in cold blood.

Such ordeals as this of Hugh Glass could be recounted many times over in the history of the men who blazed the trails into the Rockies. Gold they left in the grass roots, their beaver they spent as if money were an evil to be got rid of in haste.

And such, perhaps, for most of them, it was. For however exciting may have been the anticipation with which they approached St. Louis on their infrequent visits, it was certainly of a lesser order than their relief when they pointed back penniless into virgin territory.

With only their rifles, knives and a little salt, they headed out with never failing enthusiasm to a life where each was his own man, where the far sky and the high hills, the deep rivers and the thick forests, the fish and the game, the fur and the hides were their home, their food, their clothes and their profits. And the price they paid in battle and hardship—which would seem beyond endurance to most men today—to them was a fitting price for freedom.

The knowledge of what those free trappers endured and accomplished could be a source of strength to us—who again live in a world where weakness is incompatible with survival.

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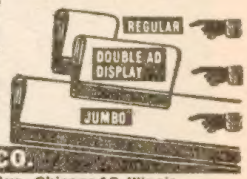

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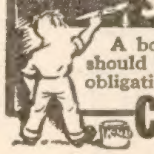

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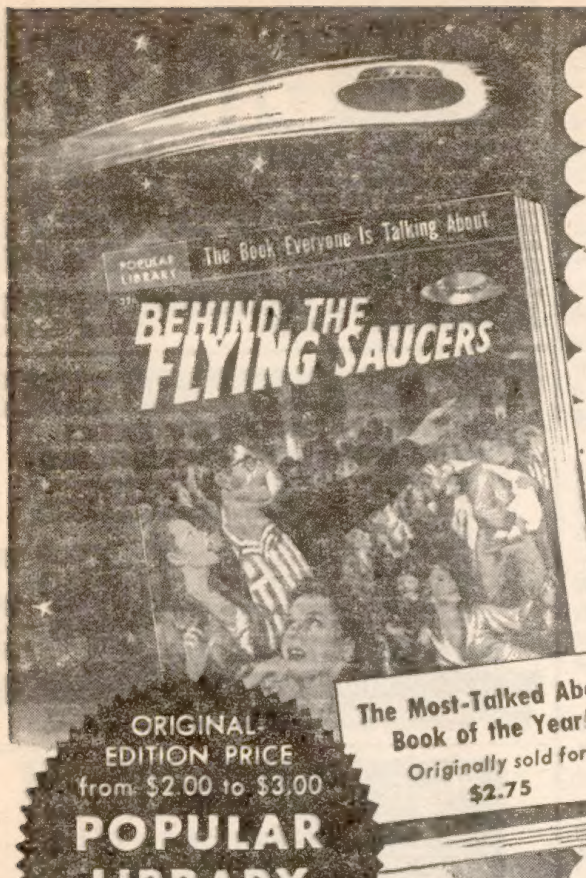

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FIGHTING RAMROD

CHAPTER I

Advice Declined

THE PARSON closed the battered Bible from which he had read the marriage service. It was all over now. Ella Land, the range beauty, and Van Winston, owner of the Circle W Ranch, were husband and wife.

There was a sudden stir in the crowd

The battling foreman of the Double Y uses fist, gun and rope in a struggle to depose rustler kings of the range!

A Novel by CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

in the big living room. People surged to their feet. Voices rose in sibilant murmurs.

The Two Forks parson smiled at Ella Land—now Ella Winston—but she turned away, not smiling at all. She felt Van Winston's insistent tug on her arm. Then his big, clumsily eager hands pulled her against his chest. His lips descended avidly to hers, imprisoning them, holding them.

With a convulsive jerk Ella shoved him away.

"What's the matter?" he said. The frown that was never far away from his dark brows rushed like a black shadow across his features.

She stood straight and stiff before him, the color high in her smooth cheeks. "I don't like rough handling—even from a husband."

Always quick to take affront, Winston stepped toward his bride. His eyes were like tiny marbles—black and hard as agate. Then the guests surged around them. If they had heard the sharp exchange none gave any sign.

Bess Landon, wife of Sheriff Fred Landon, rushed up, kissed Ella warmly.

"Good luck, Ella," she cried.

Ella smiled faintly, a tired, cynical smile. "Thanks," she said, and automatically held out her hand to the next woman in line.

Bess Landon moved on, shooting a swift glance toward Van Winston. He stood talking to the owner of the Two Forks bank, and to the proprietor of The Mercantile. The townsmen were congratulating Winston, but, paying little attention, he kept watching Ella with a morose and brooding interest. His look was not that of a happy bridegroom.

Oddly enough, few of the ranchers and cowpunchers present had come forward to extend their good wishes to Winston. Most of them were already pushing out onto the veranda. The few who did shake hands with Winston did so hurriedly as if it were an unpleasant task that had to be accomplished for the sake of propriety.

Ella was still surrounded by ranch wives and girls, but they, too, seemed to be in a hurry. They lingered for a perfunctory kiss, then pushed their way to the veranda doorway.

ELLA'S SULTRY green eyes smoldered. With her raven-black hair and finely sculptured face she was a beautiful girl. but hers was a cold sort of beauty. Her wedding gown was a long gray taffeta dress with a tight bodice that accented the full maturity of her curves. It lent additional height to her slender figure, inches taller than that of her husband.

As the room gradually cleared she searched the shadowy area near the far doorway, plainly looking for someone. For a brief moment, at the sight of a man lounging against the wall, her eyes brightneed. Winston saw that, and his heavy lips clamped tight.

Several chap-clad punchers wearing fresh shirts and bandannas, their boots highly polished for the occasion, moved toward Ella. But the tall, broad-shouldered man by the door did not stir. Smoke dribbled past the man's lips as he took a drag at a cigarette. Quietly he peered over the screen of smoke at Ella and Winston.

Then Ella's attention was taken from the man at the door as Margo Nash from the Double Y outfit came up and took her hand.

"My best wishes, Ella," Margo said gaily.

Margo, a hardy range-bred girl, at twenty-two was in the full bloom of womanhood. Her tall, straight body was generously curved and proportioned and she walked with a lithe, easy grace. Bright, long-lashed gray eyes and a wide, red-lipped mouth gave a glow of vitality and health to her features.

Ella's thin lips quirked. "Sure you mean that?" she drawled.

"Why not?" said Margo. The sultry look she knew so well was a banner in Ella's eyes. Margo said softly: "You've got your man."

Ella's laugh was brittle. "Have I?"

Looking at her, Margo was saddened.

TOM FRAZER

Like most of the range she knew only too well that this was a marriage of convenience. Winston was ten years older than Ella, dour and unfriendly and cordially disliked in Two Forks. But he had money and influence—things Ella had always wanted.

Well, she had them now. And already she was sorry. The taut down-curve of her lips told Margo all she needed to know. And with it came a twinge of worry.

She turned away. She couldn't trust herself to speak. Somehow she did manage a smile for Tom Frazer, the man standing alone near the wall, smoking a cigarette, but she felt a constricting tightness in her chest as she passed him on the way to the door. Tom was the ramrod of her Double Y Ranch. She was running it while her father was recuperating from a serious illness out in Frisco.

She hurried on outside as she saw Tom push his long, muscular body away from the wall and swing down the room toward Ella. She told herself she wouldn't look back. But she did. And she saw Tom Frazer bend down and kiss Ella full on the lips!

Margo turned away and hurried on out into the sunlight.

Had she known it, that kiss was brief and impersonal. Yet even so it stirred the embers of an old fire. There had been a time when Frazer had thought of himself in Winston's place. Ella had that effect on a man. He knew. But she wasn't any good for him. Nor for any man.

"Well, aren't you going to say something?" Ella asked mockingly.

"You've gone and done it," Frazer said. "I wish you the best."

"Thanks," she said. "I'll probably need it." Then she asked sharply: "Where's Bill Corey? I've got to see him."

Frazer's blue eyes clouded. "That's all over. Forget him."

"No!" Ella said with swift earnestness. "It'll never be over!"

"Keep off Bill Corey," Frazer warned. "You're only buying trouble."

"Maybe I like trouble," she said defiantly.

Frazer saw Van Winston striding toward them. He gave Ella a warning look, then wheeled to face Winston.

"Congratulations," he said.

WINSTON nodded surlily. He stared at Frazer's outstretched hand but made no move to take it. Winston had the intolerance of many a big rancher for small cowmen and for hired hands. He had stepped on many people to reach his present level of prosperity. He would step

on more before his days were done.

Yet Frazer knew it was not this, but gnawing jealousy that was the cause of Winston's hostility. Winston knew that Ella and Frazer had once been close friends, and he also knew how cold and calculated his marriage was. He owned Ella in name. But how much of her did he really possess? And Winston was a man whose appetite for possession amounted almost to a mania. There was fear in him that Ella had not stopped caring for Frazer.

"You've had your kiss, Frazer," he said savagely. "You understand, of course, it's the last."

Temper flared hotly in Frazer's eyes. The muscles of his arms stiffened. He wasn't a redhead for nothing.

Violence was never far from the surface of Tom Frazer's emotions. Action was the core of his being. He was a fine-looking man, too, with that red hair of his, face tanned a deep brown by the sun, and a mouth that was straight and firm, hinting at the bulldog tenacity that was so much a part of his nature.

He looked steadily at Winston, fully

aware of what the rancher was driving at. But his streak of mule-headedness impelled him to strike back.

"If you've got something on your mind, better get it off now, Winston."

"This is no time for you two to be fighting," Ella said quickly. She took Winston's arm. "They'll be putting the food on the tables outside. Come on. I'm hungry."

Frazer followed them, his spurs jangling. Somehow the sound was like a discordant bell, warning of trouble ahead—trouble for Ella and for anyone with whom she permitted herself to be friendly.

In the front yard planks had been set

The renegade Big T owner swept up his gun and fired (CHAP. XVIII)

up on sawhorses to form two huge tables. Benches and wooden crates served as chairs. Neighbor women were helping Winston's housekeeper bring out the fried steaks, steaming potatoes, baked beans, canned tomatoes and great mugs of coffee.

There was a small keg of whisky under the trees for the men. But there wasn't much talk or laughter despite the drinking. Frazer found Bill Corey near the whisky keg.

"Ella was asking for you," Frazer told Corey. "Aren't you going to wish her luck on her wedding day?"

Corey's long mouth twisted in a cynical smile. "Sure, Tom. I've got lots of time."

Corey was a heavy-thewed man. He had a ruddy complexion, dark blue eyes, a mercurial temperament, sun-browned features and a mocking, devil-may-care air. Yet at times he was apt to be surly and truculent. Bill Corey had no solidity.

"Time's run out for you now," Frazer told him.

Corey shrugged and said softly: "I thought you knew Ella better than that."

"That's what I'm worried about."

Corey threw an arm about Frazer's shoulder. "Kid, don't worry," he murmured. "Life is too short."

That answer, Frazer knew, was typical of Corey. He knew the man so well, for though they were opposites in temperament they had always hit it off. Despite Frazer's own recklessness he had always been able to curb his friend's tendency toward wild excesses.

Lately Frazer had been concerned about the way Corey was letting his one-man cow spread run down. Corey had become lazy and careless, and spent more and more time in town, gambling and drinking.

FRAZER kept thinking of Corey as he ate. Once or twice he saw Corey exchange a surreptitious glance with Ella, the girl's color heighten. Winston, feeling the liquor he had sampled, forced another kiss from Ella but she hadn't been gracious about it and resentment was building up in Winston.

Suddenly the meal was over. People began drifting away. At any other ranch a wedding party such as this would have lasted all afternoon and well into the night. But Winston was not a genial host. He resented the ranchers who, if it had not been for the wedding, would never have come near the Circle W.

Frazer looked around for Corey but did not see him. Ella, too, was missing. Winston was talking to his housekeeper, who shook her head. Then Winston scowled and trudged off to the house.

Winston was asking for Ella, of course, and Frazer was sure that she and Corey had found some way to be alone. With Winston on the prod, Frazer decided to look for them. He wandered behind a grove of trees to the far side of the barn—and stopped. Inside the barn Ella and Corey were locked in each other's arms. When at last Corey lifted his head he said:

"Ella, I don't know when I'll ever get enough of kissing you."

Ella seemed suddenly to shrivel. "Bill," she moaned, "why did I ever marry Van?"

"You know the answer better than I do" he said.

"You don't even care," she accused.

"Sure I do." Corey's smile seemed to be painted on his face. "Any time you tire of Winston you know where to find me."

Frazer disliked the rôle of eavesdropper, so he retreated. But as he glanced toward the ranch-house he changed his mind. Winston had tramped down the veranda steps, was angling toward the back yard.

Quickly Frazer stepped inside the barn doorway.

"Better break it up," he said. "Winston's heading this way."

Ella pulled nervously away from Corey. With deft fingers she straightened her hair, smoothed out her dress.

"Thanks for the warning," she said to Frazer. "I'll go out the front way. You two duck out through the back."

"I'm not afraid of Winston," growled Corey.

"Please!" she said, coming close to Corey and gripping his arms. "Don't make it difficult for me. I'll find some way

of seeing you."

Corey kissed her lightly. "If you don't I will."

Ella turned and hurried to the half-open door of the barn.

"Come on, Bill—the party's over," Frazer said and led Corey out the back door.

As they slipped through the brush to head for the corral, they heard the brief exchange when Winston met Ella.

"Where were you?" Winston demanded.

"I wanted some air," she said.

"Where? In the barn?" There was a pause. When Ella didn't reply Winston growled doggedly: "I'll bet you were seeing Frazer again."

This time Ella answered swift and hard.

"If you're so certain of that why did you ask me?"

"Keep away from him, Ella, or I'll kill him!"

"That'll take a lot of doing," she flung back at him.

If Winston replied neither Frazer nor Corey heard. A few minutes later when they emerged from the corral with their saddles, Winston and Ella were standing stiffly near the ranchhouse veranda waving good-by to departing guests.

Frazer and Corey said good-by and climbed into their saddles. Squinting against the slanting rays of the hot afternoon sun blazing down out of a pale blue sky, Frazer said:

"Going home, Bill?"

COREY grinned and shook his head. "No, I reckon I'll ride on into town and see what's doing."

"You're spending more time in Two Forks lately than on your ranch," Frazer said caustically.

The blue in Corey's eyes turned to purple. "Shucks, kid, you keeping tabs on me again?"

"Just hate to see your place go to pot."

"It's mine, Tom, so let me run it."

"That's just it. You don't run it."

Corey stopped his horse. He twisted in the saddle. His eyes flickered coldly at Frazer. Then he grinned. "Stop worrying." He jingled a few coins in his pocket. "A little poker never hurt anybody."

"It hasn't helped you any, Bill." Frazer hesitated before adding: "You still seeing Guy Thorpe?"

"Sure. What of it?"

"You listen to me," said Frazer. "Steer clear of him."

Corey's grin became wry. "I can take care of myself. Thorpe's all right. A little tough, maybe. That's all."

"What about the rustling?" Frazer queried.

"No one's ever caught him at it."

Frazer's control snapped. "Bill, you're a fool! First Thorpe. Now Ella. They'll both bring you grief."

Corey's mouth hardened. "That's enough. You just let me pick my friends and run my life. So long."

Corey touched his piebald gelding with his spurs and sped off past the Circle W ranchhouse.

CHAPTER II

Redhead's Challenge

HARRY YORKE, one of Margo Nash's Double Y punchers was waiting with her near a cottonwood grove when Frazer rode up. York, a mild-mannered, friendly man in his middle thirties, was always on hand to see Margo's comfort and convenience. Now he had her team of blacks hitched to the Double Y buckboard and was mounted on his own saddle pony, waiting for orders as he tossed back the unruly brown hair that kept escaping from beneath his sombrero.

"Tex and Hal go already?" Frazer asked, mentioning two other Double Y cowboys who had attended the wedding.

"Yeah," said Yorke. "You need for me anything?"

"Better ride over to the River Bend

line camp and keep an eye on that herd of prime Herefords. I'll send Tex over in the morning to give you a hand."

Yorke nodded, tipped his hat to Margo and rode away. Frazer dismounted, tied his roan to the tail gate of the buckboard and got into the seat beside the girl. He freed the reins of the blacks from the whip stock and asked Margo: "Ready?"

She nodded and they had started off when Winston ran toward them, waving his arm imperiously.

"Hold it, Frazer!"

The Double Y ramrod pulled in the blacks. Winston gave him an unfriendly glance and spoke pointedly to Margo.

"Have you thought any more about my offer?"

"No, she hasn't Winston," snapped Frazer.

Winston's features reddened with rage. "Do you own the Double Y?" he demanded.

"I run it," Frazer said coolly.

Their eyes met—Winston's black as coal and as hard, Frazer's a frigid steel-blue.

"Does Frazer speak for you, Margo?" Winston blurted.

Her lips pressed together. Her dislike for Winston was plain. "He does," she said shortly.

"I offered a fair price for the Double Y," Winston persisted.

"Yes, you did," said Frazer.

Winston ignored the ramrod.

"You've still got a note at the bank," he insinuated to Margo.

"I can get a renewal if I need it," Margo said.

"Don't be too sure. Money's tight. What'll you do if Ben Revere at the bank refuses to renew?"

"We'll take care of that when the time comes," she said coldly.

Winston shrugged. "Suit yourself," he told her, but he showed no anger or disappointment. Probably he had known what Margo's answer would be.

Frazer touched the whip to the blacks, and the buckboard careened down the road. Behind its rattling wheels rose a cloud of gray, finely powdered dust. After a while Margo asked Frazer:

"What were doing down at the barn?"

Frazer reddened, but said, "I was with Bill Corey."

"Ella was there, too," Margo commented.

It was ironic, Frazer thought, how people just would link his name with Ella's, because they had gone together for a time. No one suspected that Corey had long ago succeeded him in Ella's affections. As careless as Corey was in many things, he had been mighty secretive in his meetings with Ella. Whenever he had been seen with Ella both had managed to make it appear a casual encounter.

"You've got things all wrong," Frazer told Margo.

Margo looked fully at Frazer, and there was nothing soft or tender in her gaze. "She's married now," she reminded. "I hope you'll remember."

"I'm not likely to forget," he said tightly.

Margo looked off across the prairie. Frazer, glancing at her profile, thought again as he had many times before, how fine her features were. She was so honest and straightforward, too, and the way she had taken over the responsibility of the ranch, doing a man's work in the saddle, would have made any man proud.

THE HOURS they had spent out on the range together had come to be wonderful ones to Frazer. Yet Margo had always maintained a certain reserve with him. He thought now that he knew why. She couldn't forget Ella.

He pulled the blacks to a halt.

"What are you stopping for?" Margo asked.

"It's time we got a few things straightened out between us," he said firmly. "Like how I really feel about you and the Double Y."

She shrugged. "There's nothing to straighten out," she said coolly.

"Yes, there is. When your father was taken ill I promised him I'd look after the ranch and you, too. I reckon you'll agree

that during the months you were with him in Frisco the Double Y made money." Frazer's voice was sober and serious. "I don't reckon there's a thing I wouldn't do for you or the Double Y."

As Margo looked at him, he felt a wild impulse to take her in his arms. But he got a grip on himself.

"If by any chance you're trying to make love to me," she said bitterly, "this is neither the time nor the place for it." Her narrowed gray eyes were unrelenting.

Grimness came to Frazer's face. He felt suddenly as cold as though an arctic wind had dulled him. He leaped out of the buckboard untied his roan, and vaulted into the saddle.

"Where are you going?" Margo was abruptly bewildered, a little frightened, too.

"To town," he said curtly. "You can take the buckboard back to the ranch."

His face hard set, he lifted his hat and rode away at a fast clip.

A few minutes before three o'clock Tom Frazer racked up his pony at the hitching-rail in front of the Two Forks Bank. Standing on the edge of the board walk to build a quirly, he studied the town's main street, rutted by the tires of many wagons and pitted with holes. A brisk wind agitated the loose gray soil, and fine grains of whirling sand pelted his face and weathered ramshackle store buildings.

Only a few people were on the street. The sun was hot. A purple haze shimmered above the Toulose Mountains in the distance. The hostler at the livery barn down the street sat in a rickety wooden chair tilted precariously against the wall. Four horses were tied in front of the Maverick Saloon. A lone nester wagon was drawn up beside the Mercantile and a small stooped man was piling a sack of food in the wagon bed.

Frazer took a puff at his cigarette, then turned and walked into the bank.

There was no one at the cashier's wicket. Then Frazer saw the bespectacled Jan Marvin, the cashier.

"Ben in his office?" Frazer asked.

Marvin nodded, and Frazer moved past the wicket to a closed door marked PRIVATE.

Ben Revere, a small, narrow-shouldered individual with a pale face and pale gray eyes looked up, and a red flush of anger stained his thin, tight-skinned face.

"Next time, knock," he said coldly.

Frazer took a drag on his cigarette. "I reckon any time I want to see you, Ben, I'll walk in," he said, and there was an unpleasant light in his eyes the banker plainly didn't like. "I came to see you about Margo Nash's note."

Revere's answer was cautious. "What about it?"

"We're going to need more time."

Revere barely met Frazer's glance. "You can't have it."

Frazer's big blunt fingers crushed his cigarette in two. He dropped it to the floor. His heel ground it to shreds.

"Why not?" he demanded harshly. "You told Margo that if she needed more time you'd take care of her."

[*Turn page*]

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REVERE looked apologetic. He began fumbling with his collar. "Well," he said lamely. "Money is tight."

Frazer said coldly: "Now, let's have the real reason."

Worry showed in the banker's eyes. He coughed nervously. "I've told you. Money is tight. We have too many outstanding notes. It's been a hard year in the cattle business and—"

"All the more reason for you to stand behind the cowmen who are your livelihood," said Frazer relentlessly.

"The bank is holding everyone to the deadline of his note," said Revere. If I make an exception with Margo—"

The rest was choked off as Frazer leaped around the desk and caught the banker's shirtfront in one big fist, pulling the neckband tightly around Revere's throat. The banker's eyes popped.

"You still got Margo's note?" Frazer demanded.

Revere struggled ineffectually, flailing with swinging arms. Frazer's grip tightened. He said savagely:

"I want the truth, Revere—now. Did you sell Margo's note to Van Winston?"

Revere quailed at the cold fury in Frazer's eyes. Weakly he nodded. Frazer pushed him backward. Revere toppled into his chair, carried it over backwards and crashed into the wall. He lay there whimpering in terror, as Frazer towered over him, wild with rage as he realized how Winston held the whip over Margo's head.

"Some day, Revere," Frazer said, "you're going to be run out of Two Forks on a rail. Why did you sell that note?"

"I—I told you," Revere babbled brokenly. "The—the bank over—overextended itself. Winston offered me a good profit on the note. I—I just had to take it."

Frazer couldn't trust himself in the office with Revere any longer. He hitched up his single gunbelt and stalked out the door. His rage remained with him as he walked down to the Maverick Saloon. Glancing at the hitch-rack he saw that of the four ponies tied there, three wore a Big T brand. That meant that Guy Thorpe, his foreman, Pole Richmond, and probably that hardcase, Ray Long, were inside playing poker. The fourth horse carried a C Minus brand—Bill Corey's iron.

Frazer wheeled across the walk, thrust past the bat-wing doors. The reek of stale whisky and sawdust smote his nostrils. He blinked in the gloom, then saw the four men whose horses were outside seated at a card table. Chips and money were piled in front of each player. There were two half-filled whisky bottles and glasses on the table.

Frazer strode over to the players. Pole Richmond's caustic, razor-edged voice drawled:

"Corey, here's your watch dog!"

Bill Corey swung around.

"What are you doing in here, Tom?" he barked. There was only a small stack of chips in front of him. He was in a black mood.

"You own the Maverick now, Bill?" Frazer asked idly, but his eyes were on Pole Richmond, watching the Big T ramrod's cold mirthless features.

Richmond's face was gaunt and gray and unsmiling. He was two inches over six feet and slender, but there was a wiry, feline strength in his gangling frame. His hands, smooth and white like a gambler's, hardly looked big enough to handle the two big .45 Colts that rode in hand-tooled leather holsters on each hip. Frazer knew better. Richmond was fast—devilishly fast with a gun. And he didn't require much provocation to use one.

"Maybe you'd like to sit in the game," Guy Thorpe suggested.

The owner of the Big T was a powerfully built man, but his waist was lean and trim from long hours in the saddle. He had a long, hawk-nosed face and a mouth that was like a bar of gray steel against his brownish skin. Another two-gun man—a man who lived rashly and played life's long gambles.

"You checking out?" Frazer asked him.

THORPE dealt the cards, and fanned out his own hand for a look before

answering Frazer.

"No," he said then, gesturing at the pile of winnings in front of him.

"Then I won't buy in," Frazer told him.

Thorpe peered up at Frazer challengingly.

"Maybe you're fussy about who you play poker with," he murmured.

"Maybe I am," said Frazer.

Into Thorpe's gray-green eyes came an unnatural light. Slowly he bunched his cards and laid them on the table top.

"I don't like your talk, Frazer," he said.

The other players tensed. Pole Richmond tightened his lips.

Frazer never shifted his ground. His blue eyes were steady and unwavering as they met Thorpe's. When he spoke it was in a voice that was soft but filled with menace.

"I don't give a hoot whether you like it or not!"

Richmond's hands moved back toward his guns. Thorpe's face turned thunderous. The very air in the room throbbed to the thinly leashed violence. As Thorpe teetered on the edge of a break, the red-headed Double Y ramrod coolly watched.

CHAPTER III

Fist Gladiators

FRAZER stood with his hands at his side. His indolence in front of the three Big T riders showed his contempt for them. Yet none of them were fools. They knew how dangerous he could be, once he was ready to swing into action.

"Cut it out, Tom," Bill Corey said, in a voice thick from the liquor he had consumed. He pushed four chips to the middle of the table. "Let's play poker," he said. "I'm raising you, Thorpe."

Thorpe sat taut and looked at Pole Richmond. Richmond grinned carelessly, thumbed some chips toward the pot and said,

"Twenty dollars better."

Thorpe added chips to the pile in the center. "I'll see you, Pole."

It was up to Corey now. Anger and indecision were mirrored in his face. He had been holding three aces but hadn't bettered on the draw. His hand lingered over the two remaining chips in front of him. Then with a curse he flung his hand into the discard.

Richmond and Thorpe exchanged grins. The Big T ramrod turned up three kings. Thorpe, however, had come up with a jack full. He reached for the chips.

"How long have you been losing like this, Bill?" Frazer asked.

"It's my money," Corey said bitterly.

"Sure it is," Frazer agreed, "but I hate to see you throwing it away."

He walked over to the bar and ordered a drink. Picking up the glass he drank half of it, thinking how Corey had changed in the last few months, had grown morose. His gay moods were rare these days. Since he seldom won at poker Frazer wondered how long it would be before he was flat broke. Lingering by the bar, he watched Corey finally win a pot on his own deal. The deck passed to Pole Richmond—and it was in that deal that Frazer saw Richmond, though deft and fast, deal off the bottom of the deck.

He lunged toward Richmond. "Hold it!" he ordered, and glared. He whirled on Corey. "Bill, you poor fool! Where are your eyes? . . . You always deal off the bottom, Pole?"

Richmond and Thorpe went for their Colts simultaneously. With a lightning motion Frazer flung his whisky, glass and all, full at Thorpe's face. Thorpe's fingers were closing around his gun butt when the burning liquor splashed into his eyes. He yelled in pain, pawing at his eyes.

Frazer had already leaped at Richmond. A short right to the point of his jaw spun the Big T man against an empty table and he carried it to the floor with him. He lost his right hand Colt, groped frantically for his other weapon as he

yelled above the din:

"Gun him down, Ray!"

Chunky, pockmarked, kinky-haired Ray Long never got a chance. For Bill Corey, in spite of all the drinking he had done, rallied his senses and slammed Long's Colt out of his hand just as he was lining the sights on Frazer's back.

"Keep out of this, Ray!" Corey warned. His own gun was in his hand now as he backed off. "That goes for you, too, Guy. Don't lift that hogleg!"

With tears streaming from his pain-reddened eyes, Thorpe snarled savagely at Corey: "I hope you know what you're doing!"

"I know this!" snapped Bill Corey. "If there's going to be a fight it'll be fair—no back-shooting!"

Frazer was only dimly aware of what the others were doing. All he fully realized was that the rage in him needed release. He saw Richmond slap for his left-hand gun, and his boot toe caught the ramrod's wrist as the weapon was flicked out of leather. The gun went skidding across the floor. Then Richmond's groping hand—he had been given no chance to scramble up from the floor—trapped Frazer's ankle. A savage pull hauled the Double Y foreman off his feet. As he fell, a sledge-hammer blow caught the side of his head. Then the Big T foreman was trying to jam his thumbs into Frazer's eyeballs. He struck Richmond's hand away, wrenched his body to one side, spilling Richmond to the floor again.

THEY rolled over the rough boards, punching and jabbing, the sodden thump of fists finding a mark on flesh and bone. Frazer suddenly found himself on top of Richmond. With both hands he pummeled the man's face. His knuckles connected with the Big T foreman's nose and blood squirted. Richmond moaned but drove his knee into Frazer's stomach.

The breath rushed out of Frazer. His heavy shoulders struck the poker table and it crashed. Chips, glasses, cards and bottles skidded to the floor. Whisky ran a brown trail along the scuffed puncheons.

"Stand back, Guy!" Frazer heard Corey yell. "Give them room!"

Then Richmond was reeling to his feet and leaping at him. Frazer, attempting to recapture his wind after that knee thrust, slipped in the spilled whisky, arms flailing. With his guard down he was a fair target for a whistling right-hand uppercut. The shock of the punch traveled from his jaw to the top of his skull. A reddish haze gyrated before his eyes. As he went down, Richmond leaped for him, plainly intent on tromping him. Frazer tried to writhe away, but one heavy boot caught him in the chest. The agony of it was torture.

Richmond's cruel features burned with a furious frenzy. Sensing victory in his grasp, flaming hate was in his eyes as he drove at Frazer again.

Though the pain in Frazer's chest beat in pulsating waves, he caught the leg of a chair in one hand and hurled the chair in Richmond's path.

The chair hit Richmond directly below the knees. He tried to halt his forward lunge. He could not. As the chair bounced off his legs, he pitched forward on his face.

Frazer climbed to his feet, his long red hair straggling across his eyes. The warm taste of blood was in his mouth. Every breath he drew into his lungs brought fresh pain. But when he saw that Richmond was rising, still full of fight, Tom Frazer's savage, indomitable will took hold.

Born and bred in a hard land where a man's power to resist often meant the difference between life and death, he knew the Big T foreman meant to kill him. Richmond was a man nurtured in brutality, drilled in the vicious art of destruction.

Hurt though he was, Frazer met Richmond's next rush with a counterattack that surprised the Big T ramrod. Frazer blocked a lead on his forearm, then struck back with two sharp lefts to Richmond's face. One hit Richmond's already bleeding nose, spreading a claret streak over his mouth and chin.

Richmond stopped, covered up momentarily, then swung a right that missed. Frazer slipped inside, countering with a left to the nose again. He drove two more lefts to the stomach, then a pile-driving right to the jaw. Richmond hit the floor amidst the litter of broken glasses.

"Get in there and fight, Pole!" Thorpe raged.

Richmond's features were a livid mask of blood. One eye was puffed. He was breathing heavily through his mouth. Frazer was breathing hard. But the fever of fighting once more was boiling inside him.

"Got enough, Pole?" he asked when Richmond didn't rise.

"Not yet," Richmond rasped, and jumped up with the jagged broken whisky bottle in his hand. It was a wicked weapon, more deadly than a knife. It could tear a man's insides out.

Corey roared: "Put that bottle down, Richmond, or I'll drill you!"

But there was no time for a shot before Richmond flung himself at Frazer. The shattered bottle cut a whistling arc through the air. One of the jagged tines of glass raked Frazer's shoulder, ripping his shirt and leaving a gash in the flesh.

Then Frazer came in close. His left hand caught Richmond's right wrist. He flung his right arm around Richmond, got a solid purchase on the ramrod's belt. With a tremendous heave he lifted Richmond off his feet and hurled the man against the bar.

RICHMOND struck the bar with a jolt that threatened to uproot the bar from the floor. The whisky bottle flew from his hand. As he hung there, half-bent across the bar Frazer moved in for the finish. A solid left to the heart, then a pulverizing right to the point of his jaw, and the Big T foreman's eyes glazed and he slowly slid to the floor, one arm dangling over the brass foot rail.

Frazer let his arms fall wearily. He looked down at Richmond's battered, bloody features and experienced a sour distaste. As he turned away from the bar, Corey was still holding Thorpe and Long at bay.

"Thanks, Bill," he muttered. He picked up his hat from the floor, clamped it on his head.

"You fool!" growled Corey. "You almost bought yourself a shot in the back."

Frazer glanced at Thorpe and Long. The antagonism in their eyes was a living challenge. The thick vein in Thorpe's neck stood out like a steel cable. The light in his eyes was yellow.

"Get out!" he ordered in a voice almost unrecognizable because of the hate that throbbed in it.

"When I'm good and ready," Frazer said coldly. He looked at Corey. "Maybe you've had enough poker for a spell."

Corey turned sullen. "Skip the sermon, kid."

There was venom in Thorpe's eyes and venom in his voice as he said: "Frazer, don't ever get in my way again."

Frazer's eyes flashed. "How about now, Thorpe?"

"I'll pick my time," Thorpe said. "One thing is sure. You'll pay for this. And if I ever see you on Big T range I'll consider you fair game."

"Afraid I might see some strange cattle eating Big T grass?"

Thorpe's lips twitched in rage. "Calling me a rustler, eh? No man can put a rustler tag on *me* without answering for it!"

His hand dropped to his holstered Colt. His bitter glance was like a white-hot brand searing Frazer. But the redhead only returned his gaze with an unwinking steadiness that was disconcerting. Tom Frazer's stern creed was—no surrender and no compromise.

"Guy," he said smoothly, "make your play or shut up."

The challenge might have goaded a more headstrong, unthinking man than Thorpe into action. But Thorpe only shook his head as his white face became red, then purple. Ray Long watched him, ready to go for his gun if Thorpe elected to draw.

"Not now," Thorpe finally said, his voice so thick it almost bogged down in

his throat. "Your number's coming up soon. Just remember that."

"In other words, watch my back," Frazer said with icy scorn. "Well, you remember this! Some day I figure on finding out how you make your money. If it's the way I think, Two Forks won't be big enough to hold both of us."

He strode to the saloon door. There he turned and said, "See you soon, Bill," and shouldered through the bat-wings into the late afternoon sunlight.

Thorpe swung around to Bill Corey. "Corey," he said savagely, "the next time you interfere in my business I'll kill you."

Corey was cold sober now. His eyes were still red-veined, but he was thinking clearly and he was braced for trouble.

"You were fixing to plug Tom in the back," he said.

"He asked for it," Thorpe said curtly.

"That so?" The red in Corey's eyes flamed. "Well get this. I take your money and I ride with your bunch but I've told you before to keep hands off Tom. He's my friend."

"Great friend you are."

"That's my affair."

POLE RICHMOND groaned and began to move. Thorpe jerked his head at Long.

"Get a pail of water and throw it on Pole," he ordered. "We've got to be riding soon."

As Long went out the rear door of the saloon, Thorpe said to Corey:

"I wonder how Frazer would like it if he knew you helped steal that last bunch of Margo Nash's cattle?"

"Are you aiming to tell him?" Corey's tone was dangerous.

"He'll figure it out some day." Thorpe shrugged.

"When he does your number will be up, Guy. If Tom figures that far he'll know who I'm riding for. That won't be good for you."

Thorpe sneered. All his arrogance had returned. "I'm not worried. He's on his way out now."

Corey's jaw hardened. He took a stride nearer to Thorpe. "What I said still goes, Guy. Keep your hands off Tom. If anything happens to him I'm coming after you."

A wave of dark blood flooded Thorpe's face. "Don't try to threaten me," he warned. "You spoke about taking my money. But I notice you're hungry for it. You're nothing but a two-timing two-bit cowman. Not a rider in the Big T crew has any use for you. Most of them are outlaws. But not one of them is cutting his best friend's throat behind his back like you are. Think that over. And remember, if a man gets in my way he goes —with a bullet or with anything that happens to be handy. That goes for Tom Frazer."

Thorpe turned insolently away as the back door swung open to admit Ray Long with a pail of water.

CHAPTER IV

Ultimatum

AFTER Margo Nash and Tom Frazer left the Circle W ranch, taking the Double Y crew with them, the wedding celebration broke up rapidly. It seemed that those remaining could not go quickly enough.

Ella and Van Winston stood on the veranda as buckboards and buggies rolled by in brief whorls of dust. There were perfunctory waves, awkward thanks. Some riders did not bother with those formalities.

As the guests disappeared Ella's spirits sank. For a time the excitement of the wedding had buoyed her up. She had been the center of attraction, the cynosure of secretly admiring eyes. But now she was alone with Van Winston. The thought was frightening. She knew dismally that this day was one she would regret for the

rest of her life.

For the first time Ella realized how much alone she would be at the Circle W. She had no particular friends in Two Forks. And it was clear that Winston was friendless.

She recalled now how the eyes of the ranch women had lingered on her face briefly—yes, it was pity she had seen in those frank glances. They knew—all those women, and men, too—that her marriage was a farce. For Ella it was an escape from poverty, a desperate groping for security. For Winston it had its roots in physical appetite and his overbearing pride in possession.

Winston's gruff voice broke into her reverie. "What are you so glum about?"

"They're all going," she said.

"Their stomachs are full at my expense," Winston grunted. "Let them go home where they belong."

"So you begrudge them a wedding meal," Ella said coldly.

He slipped his arm around her. She started to draw away, then let his arm remain where it was. He pulled her closer.

"What's eating you? You've got what you wanted."

"Have I?" she asked quickly, then stopped as his eyes bored into her.

"Frazer again," he snapped, his lips a rigid, gray streak. "Better forget him. You're married to me now."

"Tom doesn't mean anything to me," she told Winston. Thank heaven he knew nothing about Bill Corey.

"That's good," Winston said. "Let's go inside."

Her heart began beating like a trip-hammer. A wave of helplessness and fright swept her. She dreaded the hours ahead.

When she had accepted Winston's offer of marriage she had felt no qualms. What concerned her was that she had had enough of poverty and miserable living. All her life she had been going from one dirt farm to another. Her mother had

[*Turn page*]

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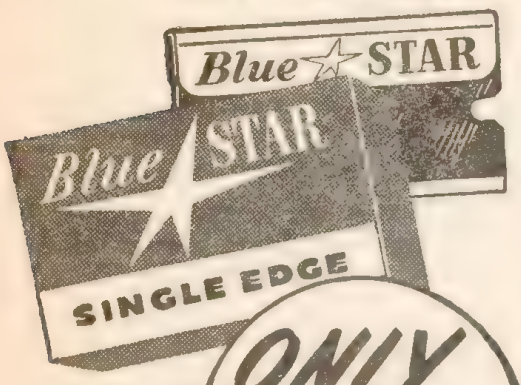

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worked herself into the grave and her father had drunk up the little he earned from grubbing in the earth. There had been days on end of wondering where her next meal was coming from. Anything was better than that—even marriage to a man she secretly detested.

But now that there was no going back she was no longer sure. The hunger flame in Winston's heavy-lidded eyes warned her what to expect.

"Don't tell me you're bashful," Winston chided her mockingly. "Or should I tell you how much I love you?"

His taunting smile made her angry.

"Don't bother," Ella told him curtly. "It wouldn't mean anything to either of us."

When they passed into the empty living room he said:

"That's right. It was a business deal. You wanted my money and the prestige that goes with the Circle W. I wanted a pretty woman."

Her hand clenched as she whirled around. "Let's not talk about it."

"What shall we talk about?" he jeered. "Tom Frazer?"

ELLA looked at his crass, heavy features, the small dark eyes, and realized—too late—that there was something secretly evil about this man. Why had she never noticed it before.

"Well, I'll talk about something else," Winston said, as again his arm went possessively around her. "You've kissed your share of men. But from now on it's only me you'll be kissing."

His head lowered. He found her lips. They were unresponsive, but his lips clung only the more tightly, until she violently shoved him away.

There was a shocked look on her face and anger whipped tongues of flame all through her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She backed away from him. Winston followed, grinning like a huge cat. A cold impalpable dread gripped her. He was watching her like a hawk, enjoying every moment, like a hunter stalking prey.

He reached for her again. Even the touch of his hand on her arm filled her with revulsion. His hand was clammy, there was an oily shine of sweat on his face. He was smiling, but it was without humor.

"Might as well start getting used to me," he said. "I'm going to want a lot of attention."

She was afraid to let him kiss her again, and equally afraid not to. Her heart was like a stone. And he claimed her, arrogant and demanding.

The slamming of the door behind them put an end to the embrace. Ella sagged against the table as she saw Jess Engel, the Circle W foreman standing at the door.

"Get out, Jess," Winston ordered. "Can't you see I'm busy acting like a husband?"

Engel tried a grin. It didn't fit. He was a dour-faced swarthy-skinned individual, tall, loose-limbed and lean-hipped. He was a hard man who treated the Circle W crew harshly and unfeelingly. Only to Winston did he show a sullen grudging respect.

"We're due to ride out to meet—" he began.

"I know," Winston cut in swiftly. "Clear out. I'll be with you in a little while."

"I'll wait for you at the corral," Engel said, and walked away.

When he was gone Winston said abruptly:

"Now we can get back to our personal business."

"Not now, Van!" Ella begged, desperation in her voice. "I really should help Mrs. Loring, the housekeeper, clean up outside."

But Winston had other ideas. "She gets paid for doing that."

Ella flattened her hands against Winston's chest. "It's too much for Mrs. Loring to handle all by herself," she said, her voice almost a sob.

"Think of your obligations to me," Winston growled. "If it hadn't been for me your old man would have lost his two-bit farm. And I paid all his debts before he was killed in that landslide on the Dun-

bar road."

"You hounded Dad enough!" Ella flared. "And all because he had the gumption to farm ground you've always claimed but don't really own."

"This is cow country. It's time you realized that. Nesters have no place here. As for the land, I don't have to own it. I take what I need."

The clatter of horses in the yard drew Winston's attention. He glanced at an ancient wall clock near the rough-hewn fireplace, then turned and went out the door without looking at his bride and hurried to the corral.

As Winston approached, Engel slid into the saddle of a rangy piebald. Len Sterling, another gaunt puncher, was already mounted. He freed the reins of a roan gelding from the corral bar and flipped them to Winston.

Winston swung into the saddle and led the way out of the ranch yard.

THEY followed the wagon road for a half mile. At a point where a hard-packed dirt trail wandered off at a sharp tangent, Winston left the road. The trail took them into higher country. They traversed meadows covered with grama grass. Here they flushed several bands of Circle W cows. Gradually stunted clumps of brush began to appear, then a few trees. Soon the way wound through a deep avenue in the pines.

Winston had nothing to say to Engel and Sterling. And neither of them felt impelled to attempt conversation.

Emerging from the pines, they rode onto a wide, flat plateau. The sun, losing some of its intense heat, slowly drifted downward in the western sky. A film of dust coated all the bushes. The only sound was the jingle of bit chains, the scuff of a horses shoe on flinty rock and the squeak of saddle leather.

The mesa narrowed and dropped into a funnel-like canyon through a high rock battlement. Once through the defile they hit rolling country again and Winston touched the spurs to his horse, whipping away at a fast clip.

They traversed a dry arroyo, and another swift mile brought them within sight of a pine-clad ridge. Winston hit the grade without any slackening of pace. Near the top of the knoll he curveted his mount sharply and plunged headlong into the brush. The horses fought their way through the tangle, and abruptly the men rode into a shadowy park. The ground was carpeted with pine needles and dried cones. A few deadfalls and an occasional weather-rotted stump covered with moss and lichens littered the area.

Winston flung an impatient glance around.

"They're late again," he said.

Engel hooked a chap-clad leg over his saddle-horn. "Probably got delayed in town," he ventured.

Fifteen minutes went by. The impatience of the Circle W owner grew.

"By the eternal, if they're not here soon—"

He broke off as the sound of riders crashing through trees reached him in the dead silence of the pine park. Facing around, he waited with a set, truculent air until three horsemen pushed into view. At the head of the group was Guy Thorpe. Behind him rode Ray Long. In the rear was the tall, battered Pole Richmond.

Winston pinned his outraged glance on Thorpe. "Where were you? We've been here close to thirty minutes."

"Got delayed in town," Thorpe replied.

"You spend too much time in Two Forks," Winston told him.

"Since when are you regulating my hours?" Thorpe drawled.

Winston's thick brows drew together in a dark frown. "There's work to be done."

"More dirty work?"

"Yeah. But there's money in it."

Thorpe grimaced angrily. "Sure, and you keep your nose clean."

"Got any complaints?" Winston demanded harshly, as his dark eyes skewered the Big T owner.

Thorpe only shrugged. Winston's attention lingered briefly on Ray Long, then on Richmond.

"What happened to friend Richmond?" he demanded. "Looks as if he got in the way of a cattle stampede."

Richmond's face was swollen. His left eye was nearly closed and the lid had turned purple. His upper lip was split. Morose and solemn, he was nursing a diabolical resentment.

"Tom Frazer horned into a poker game me and the boys were having," Thorpe explained. "There was trouble."

"I can see that." Winston laughed. His long upper lip curled in disdain. "No need to guess who came out at the short end." Richmond glared at the Circle W boss, but said nothing. "What were you and Long doing while all that was going on?"

"Corey was there, too," said Thorpe. "He tossed in on Frazer's side."

QUICKLY he gave an account of the saloon fight. The Circle W owner had a sudden thought.

"Sounds like Corey is getting out of hand," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe it's time to ditch him."

"He's still got his uses," Thorpe insisted. "And there's more money in night hawking other gents' cows than doing chores on your own place."

"And Frazer?" Winston asked.

"Leave him to me," Pole Richmond growled, his mouth a thin gash in his bruised, malevolent face.

Thorpe cuffed back his hat. "All right, Van. What's your ticket? Another raid on the Double Y?"

"Yeah," said Winston. "I want you to hit Margo's River Bend line camp. She's got some prime Herefords up that way. Get them."

"All right." Thorpe lifted his reins. "Guess we'll drift."

Winston held up his hand. "One more thing," he said. "Starting with this raid I'll cut in on your take at the other end."

"Yes you will!" snapped Thorpe. He dropped the reins.

Jess Engel let his reins slide along the mane of his horse. His hand fell to his thigh and stayed there.

"You've got objections?" asked Winston, his voice oddly mild.

"You're danged right I have!" Thorpe said, leaning forward tensely. "You said you were interested only in grass and water. The cattle are mine. That's been our deal all along."

"Well, I'm changing the deal," Winston said grimly. "From now on I cut in."

"You'll cut into a piece of tophet," Thorpe told him. His voice was steady, but furious anger lay behind it. Red flecks of rage burst like rockets in his eyes. "Did you ever figure that I've got enough men riding for the Big T to wipe out your ranch if I felt like it?"

Winston's teeth showed in a snarl. A wrong word here now, a sudden movement would touch off an explosion of killing. There was little loyalty or trust among men of this kind. Theirs was an unholy alliance that would endure only as long as they proved useful to each other.

"Don't ever try it," said Winston, after a moment of pregnant silence.

Thorpe's hand was an inch nearer his holstered gun.

"I could kill you now," he gloated.

Winston regarded him with cool contempt. "The odds are even," he drawled. "Three to three. But I wonder if Richmond is at his best right now. While you're plugging me what do you figure Engel and Sterling would be doing?" He grew sardonic. "Besides, the day I die you'll be finished in Two Forks."

"You scare me," Thorpe told him with a brittle laugh.

"It's something to think about," Winston said. "Revere is holding some papers of mine in his private safe at the bank. He's got instructions to open them up when I die. Among those papers are a few items about you, Guy." The Circle W rancher's mouth thinned out and a grin tugged at his lips. "Sheriff Landon might be interested to know you're wanted for two killings up in Idaho."

Savage curses poured from Thorpe.

"You're lying, Winston!" he tried to bluster.

Winston didn't even bother to answer

him. "You take orders from me, Thorpe," he said. "And you run your Big T outfit just as long as I feel like letting you run it. Remember that. As I said, I cut in on all future deals you make on stolen beef. And that means the profits from those Double Y cows you'll be going after tonight."

Richmond's lethal glance went from Winston to Thorpe. Rage twisted his craggy face into a mask. He was so mad he couldn't speak. Finally, he jerked his horse around and spurred toward the trees.

CHAPTER V

Tragedy at River Bend

LEAVING Two Forks Tom Frazer rode as if a high wind was shoving him along. The tumult of feelings that whirled inside him could be relieved only by some such outburst of energy.

He kept his horse at a full gallop for two miles before he calmed down. Then he pulled the speeding pony down to a trot. He had swung off the main road and was following a side trail that would eventually bisect the road to the county seat at Dunbar. He had decided to stop at Sam Bassett's outfit to ask Bassett if he'd been bothered by rustlers lately.

As he jogged along past dusty green clumps of thorny brush he again considered his relationship with Bill Corey. Once they had been inseparable, riding the hills together, going on antelope hunts in the Indian Head mountains, rearing around in the saloons of Two Forks. Now all that was changed, and the main reason was—Ella Land, now Ella Winston.

He and Corey and Ella Land had had lots of fun together at dances and barbecues. And Frazer had thought like everyone else on the range that he was the one Ella favored—until one afternoon when he had found Ella and Corey together at the abandoned Loon Peak line camp near Corey's spread.

Frazer had overheard enough before walking in on them to know they had been meeting for weeks. And the way Ella had clung to Corey told her real feelings. Frazer had bowed out, as gracefully as he could. But that was not until after he and Corey had fought, for the first and only time in their lives. They had been fairly evenly matched in strength, but in Frazer's surge of fury that day he had whipped Corey, in spite of Ella's wild efforts to stop them. When it was all over he had stalked out of the cabin, and ridden all the afternoon and most of the night. In a small cowtown on the other side of the Indian Head range, he had gone on a three-day drunk, then had ridden back to the Double Y ranch, giving no explanation for his absence. Margo had not asked him for any, but he guessed she had a pretty good idea of what had happened and that somehow Ella was at the bottom of it.

Two weeks later he had met Corey in the foothills. He had started to turn aside but Corey's quick call stopped him. Corey rode close, looking contrite.

"I'm ten kinds of a skunk, Tom," he said. "I had it coming to me. If it would do any good I'd say have another go at me and I wouldn't lift a hand."

That was a considerable admission from Corey who had his pride and a careless arrogance that, more often than not, overlooked the feelings of others.

"There's nothing to talk about," Tom Frazer had said.

Corey grimaced. "I'd hoped you might forget. A man never had a better friend than you." He laughed, a bitter laugh. "And it was all for nothing."

Frazer had stiffened to ask: "What do you mean?"

"Ella's going to be married," Corey had said, and paused. "To Van Winston."

The shock of that announcement had hit Frazer right between the eyes. But

the bitter, half-mocking light in Corey's eyes had told him it was true. Ella had despaired of Corey's ever building his outfit into a paying ranch and she wanted security. She was afraid of Bill's violence, his liking for liquor and cards.

"In other words," Corey had concluded, "I've got no future."

"And Winston has," Frazer had added.

It was pretty cold-blooded. But Corey's bitterness hadn't lasted long, and gradually Frazer learned that his own feelings for Ella had not been too deep. Corey went his own mocking, sardonic way, yet Frazer knew that he had continued to see Ella secretly even after her engagement to Winston.

THE fight between Frazer and Corey apparently had been forgotten, but they had never regained their easy and carefree camaraderie. Between them now was a constant feeling of strain, though of course much of it was due to their flare-ups over Corey's association with Thorpe and the Big T crew. Frazer was not alone in believing that the Big T was a renegade outfit, responsible for the rustling that was going on.

No one had caught a Big T rider with a stolen cow, still they were a hard bunch, and Frazer insisted that if a man ran with wolves he soon became tagged with the name of wolf. But Corey didn't care.

Corey's failings that made him so vulnerable to trouble saddened Frazer. Now his own fiery temper had embroiled him in a fight, which meant he'd have all of the Big T outfit on his neck. From now on he'd have to watch his back and ride with his gun loose in his holster.

When Frazer rode up to Bassett's small weathered ranchhouse, the rancher was out on the range. Frazer refused an invitation to dismount and turned his horse toward home.

The road was a double-rutted ribbon of gray dust winding between thick stands of chaparral and now and then skirting a rocky bluff. As he pushed on the ground turned shaly and the yellow-tipped grass began to disappear where the road ran under the shadow of a bluff.

Frazer never failed to stare up the long slope of the bluff. It was here that Ella's father had met his death in a freak slide. Land had been buried in the avalanche.

It was a dangerous spot. With the high, shaly bluff on one side and a deep culvert on the other the road was a narrow gauntlet between twin perils.

Full dusk was draining the light out of the sky when Frazer reached the Double Y. He dismounted at the corral, stripped off his rig, hung the saddle on a peg in the barn, then draped the damp saddle blanket on the top pole of the corral.

Two of the punchers, Tex White and Hal Cooper, were washing up outside the bunkhouse. They told him that Margo had gone to see Polly Simmons at the Leaning S and had not returned. Secretly Frazer was glad. He was not anxious to see Margo at the moment. He was not in the mood to answer questions about his face which bore the marks of his fight with Pole Richmond.

"You have some trouble in town?" Tex White asked him.

Frazer ran a hand along the right side of his face. He felt a lumpy swelling under his eye. The edge of his jawbone was sore. He looked at Tex levelly and said briefly:

"Had a little run-in with Pole Richmond, that's all."

Tex waited. but the ramrod offered no further information and something in the hard set of Frazer's countenance warned the puncher not to pursue the subject.

Frazer proceeded to wash the dust and grime off his hands and face. Then the cook yelled for them to come and get it and they went into the cook shack and sat down to a generous meal of fried steak, potatoes, stewed tomatoes and mugs of coffee.

Near the end of supper Frazer heard Margo ride in. She left her horse at the corral and walked straight to the house. But Frazer made no attempt to see her. In fact, he took a hand in a penny ante game in the bunkhouse to try to keep his mind off Margo and Ella and Corey. He had an uneasy presentment that Ella's

marriage was going to end in trouble. And if Corey didn't keep away from her there would inevitably be a violent climax. His mind kept wandering, so finally he threw in his cards and turned in.

HE ROSE early the next morning, sent Tex to the River Bend line camp to help Harry Yorke keep an eye on the Herefords there, then spent an hour in the breaking pen trying to take some kinks out of two half-wild broomtails from the hills.

With Hal Cooper who had been lending him a hand, he climbed through the bars of the corral, heading for the well. Both halted halfway across the yard when they noted a fast-moving dust cloud two miles away along the crest of a ridge.

"Somebody is sure fogging it up," Cooper observed, shading his eyes with a brown, muscular hand.

"Coming this way," Frazer said. "Looks like it might be Tex."

Suddenly a cold chill slid up and down his spine, a premonition of disaster. Only trouble would ride that fast on a horse.

The figure of that distant rider loomed larger and larger. There was a frozen rigidity about Frazer's features. He felt as if tragedy were closing in on him.

"It's Tex, all right," said Cooper, a little drawn around the mouth. "I don't like it."

Margo came out onto the veranda. She paused at the top of the steps but Frazer didn't turn.

"Tom, that's Tex!" she called. "He'll kill that horse he's riding. What's the matter?"

"Don't know," said Frazer gruffly. "But you can bet it isn't good."

Tex was leaning low over the mane of his laboring horse. He covered the last hundred yards in a terrific burst of speed. When he drew his foam-flecked horse to a halt the animal nearly went to its knees.

Cooper caught the bridle, steadied the weary horse. Frazer grabbed the cowboy who half-fell out of the saddle. Tex usually so cool and laconic, was thoroughly spent, but underneath the weariness Frazer detected fear and shock.

"Let's have it, Tex," he said gently. "You didn't ride that horse into the ground to bring us good news."

Tex's eyes lingered on Margo for an instant. Then he blurted:

"Harry Yorke is dead! I found him with a bullet hole right between the eyes."

Frazer heard Margo's shocked intake of breath. He saw the misery and hurt in her eyes. "Oh, my God!" she said. "Poor Harry!"

"What else?" demanded Frazer, a slow, cold anger beginning to replace his first horror.

"Those Herefords are gone. Every last one of them."

"That licks us!" moaned Cooper.

"Shut up!" Frazer ordered. "Just what did you find up there, Tex?"

Quickly Tex told how he had ridden up

[*Turn page*]

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to the River Bend line camp and had been surprised to see Yorke's horse cropping grass in the pole corral behind the cabin. Then, as he drew nearer he had seen the scuffed dirt in the yard, indicating the recent presence of many riders.

Moving to the front of the cabin, he had seen the barrel of a rifle protruding half out of the open window. He had drawn his Colt, given a loud yell to announce his presence and, receiving no answer, had advanced on the cabin. When he reached the window he had seen Yorke sprawled beneath it, a blue-black hole in the middle of his forehead. His body was cold. He had been dead for some time. The rustlers had caught him in the shack, then lit out with the cattle.

"Which way did the cattle tracks go?" Frazer demanded.

"Northeast toward the river," White replied.

Frazer nodded. "Curse their souls!" he said, his voice like a thin thread and sharp as the cutting blade of a knife. "They didn't wait long to make their move."

"What do you mean?" asked Margo.

He swung full around so that she had a clear look at his face with its bruises and discolorations.

"The Big T," he said. "I had a run-in with Pole Richmond yesterday in town and told Thorpe what I thought of him."

"I suppose Corey got in trouble and you had to pitch in to help him," Margo said sharply.

"Richmond tried dealing a poker hand off the bottom of the deck."

"So you called him on it."

Color was rising in the girl's cheeks. "Don't you think it's about time you stopped protecting Corey? He's not worth it. Now this—and a good man's life snuffed out. Just what are you planning to do?"

FRAZER looked grimly. "I'm going to pick up the trail of those Herefords," he said. "If the sign peters out at the river as it did after the last raid I figure on doing a little snooping around the Big T range."

"The Big T again!" Margo said, half in scorn. "Half the cowmen in Two Forks link Thorpe's name with rustling. But nobody's ever been able to back the talk up with evidence. Think you can?"

"I'll get him with the goods or die trying. One thing is certain. Between the rustling and Van Winston the Double Y is in a tough spot."

Margo's brows drew together in a frown. "How does Winston figure?"

"I forgot to tell you," Frazer said regretfully. "I stopped at the bank yesterday afternoon. Ben Revere sold your note to Winston."

Margo's eyes became lifeless, then darted wildly about.

"That about winds up the Double Y doesn't it?" she asked, trying to be brave, but she couldn't keep the tremor out of her voice.

"Not yet," grated Frazer. "Winston and Thorpe are going to have a battle on their hands before they're finished."

"But we needed those cattle so much," Margo said. "We'll never pay off that note!"

"There are still cows on the Double Y."

"But if we sell them we'll be bartering away our only chance of a good spring increase."

Frazer looked off toward the barn where Cooper was hitching the bays to the buckboard to go after Yorke's body.

"That note has a month to run yet," he said slowly. "A lot can happen in that time. I'm not letting those Herefords go without a fight. And I'm going alone. One man on a trail job is best. Besides, we haven't any men to spare."

"But it's too dangerous!" Margo insisted. "Suppose you run into some of the Big T crew?"

Frazer's face remained hard. "I'll take that chance."

Margo came toward him, lifted her face. "I can't let you go!" she cried.

He grinned suddenly. "So you do care—a little?"

His arms went around her. The warmth of her lithe body set his blood aflame as he felt her yielding softness. Then she pushed away from him.

"I—I just don't want you hurt," she said tremulously.

Again she had thrown up a wall between them.

"Don't worry," he said curtly. "I won't rest until I find those Herefords and get the men who killed Harry Yorke. If Thorpe's my man—and I reckon he is—he's going to learn the Double Y pays its debts."

He tramped off toward the corral.

CHAPTER VI

In the Hands of the Enemy

THERE was no difficulty picking up the trail of the stolen Herefords. Frazer saw plenty of sign that the raiding party had been a large one. And Harry Yorke, who had given his life for the Double Y, had put up a fight. Empty rifle shells scattered around the puncher's body testified to that. But suddenly out of the hostile night a heavy slug had entered the window with his name on it.

Somehow Frazer couldn't help feeling that he had sent Yorke to his doom in sending him to this line camp alone. And the puncher's death aroused in the Double Y ramrod a wild desire for revenge. This was a land of primitive passions. A man had to fight to survive, and Frazer resolved that somewhere on this range someone else would shortly die to balance the books for Harry Yorke.

Once on the trail of the rustled beef Frazer rode at a swift, steady trot. It was fairly open going for five miles. Then brush and trees appeared with greater frequency and finally the hills became steeper and rockier.

He crossed two creeks where the hoof marks of cattle and horses were sharply clear in the soft earth of the banks. But once the trail knifed into a wide granite gulch he knew he was entering the stretch where presently all sign would peter out. And it did. He found himself on a hard-rock plateau rising to a wide granite bench. From the bench the trail wound down through a brush-filled coulee and on to more rocky terrain where there was absolutely no sign to be detected.

It was the old story. Frazer was deeply troubled as he set off for the Dunbar River a half mile ahead. At the stream the ground sloped gradually down to the ford where the river was scarcely a hundred yards wide, and shallow.

Willow trees bordered the stream on either side of the ford, and the sun shone brightly down as Frazer pushed his roan gelding down to the water, as bewildered as he had been before because where there should have been hoof prints in the damp earth at the river's edge there was only the unmarked ground.

He was positive the cattle had been hazed straight toward the river. Yet if they had come this way unusual efforts must have been taken to obliterate the tracks.

Pausing just a moment to let the roan drink, Frazer splashed on to the far side. Again he saw nothing that even hinted at the recent passage of cattle and horsemen.

Patiently he scoured the far bank of the river for several hundred yards on either side of the ford. Then he cut inland, riding a great but narrowing circle, hoping to pick up some stray sign. The effort proved futile.

Because he was sure that somewhere in Thorpe's Big T badlands domain could be found the answer to the riddle of the missing Herefords, he cut back across the river and sent the roan along an old game trail that led away from the stream.

Shortly he was winding through a stand of second-growth timber. A fire had raged here, destroying many trees. Blackened stumps were still in evidence. After a while he found himself climbing a steep slope. At the crest of the wooded ridge, ahead of him he saw terraced ridges and scattered benches.

He stopped to rest the roan and studied the distant hills. Far off in a grassy basin

he spotted a small herd of grazing cattle. They would be Big T critters.

As he was about to move on again he was attracted by a sudden glint on an adjoining ridge. Then it was gone. He felt a ripple along his back. That glint could have been caused by the sun striking a rifle barrel. He was in enemy country now, also, and if he ran into Pole Richmond or any other Big T punchers he could expect trouble.

He gigged the roan off the knoll and rode on, keeping to the trees wherever he could. He was careful, too, not to be skylined for any length of time.

FIFTEEN minutes of riding brought him to a little mesa where again he saw the grassy basin and the grazing cattle, no more than two miles away now. Beyond them from the hollow between two hills came a faint curl of gray smoke. That would be Big T headquarters.

Frazer had no definite plan in mind now except to see if he could flush up some cows on Big T range wearing Double Y brands or the recent scars of rebranding. He was drifting past some brush when a scraping sound jerked him around in the saddle.

He darted a hand toward his gun—too late. A whirling lariat sped out of the chaparral, the noose settled over his shoulders, pinning his arms to his side. He tried to wrench loose, but the rope was pulled taut.

"That's got him!" said Pole Richmond's gruff voice.

The Big T foreman pushed his horse through the brush and trotted down off the bench. Another horse pushed through the screen—Ray Long. It was he who had roped Frazer. A dark-haired, flat-faced man who was a stranger to Frazer, joined Richmond.

"Get his gun," Richmond said curtly.

The dark-haired puncher rode up behind the Double Y ramrod, lifted the Colt from his holster and tossed it to Richmond.

"All right, loosen up on that rope, Ray," directed Richmond.

Long rode forward, permitting Frazer to free himself. As the Double Y man took a look at Richmond's bruised features he knew he was in bad trouble. The opaque glare of Richmond's eyes told him that.

Frazer said, with a recklessness he did not feel:

"Pole, you look as if someone ran your face through a meat grinder."

Rage ran hotly through the Big T foreman. The fingers of his right hand grew white and hard around the cedar butt of his Colt.

"When I get through with you, Frazer," he growled, "you're going to be bait for the buzzards."

"Are you sure you've got enough help?" Frazer asked. "There are only three of you."

"You won't be grinnin' when I'm through," Richmond told him. "Right now I want to know what you're doing on Big T range."

"Looking for stolen Double Y beefs," Frazer promptly replied.

"You're in the wrong place."

"I'm not sure of that." There was a challenging glow in Frazer's eyes. "Somebody raided our River Bend line camp last night, got away with a hundred Herefords and killed Harry Yorke."

Richmond's lip curled. "That's too bad. What do you want me to do about it?"

"I don't know—yet," said Frazer. "But if I ever find out that a Big T bullet killed Yorke, I'm coming after you and Thorpe, and I'll come with a smoking six."

Frazer strained forward, every muscle tense, cold defiance in every inch of him. Richmond's gun steadied on Frazer's chest.

"You're all through calling the Big T a rustling outfit," Richmond said, and gestured imperiously with the gun. "Climb down. I'm going to take you apart."

Sudden death was in the hot, dry atmosphere. Frazer knew that Richmond had no intention of making this a fair fight. This was his chance for revenge and he meant to make the most of it. The cold certainty of that honed Frazer's senses to a fine edge.

"Get down!" Richmond repeated, his voice thick with fury.

In the silence that followed this second command Frazer, with a fatalistic rashness, flung himself at Richmond. One arm batted down the Big T foreman's upswinging gun hand. Frazer heard the roar of a shot as Richmond squeezed the trigger. Richmond's horse spooked and leaped forward. The renegade lost his seat and Frazer's lunge carried the man out of the saddle. The two struck the earth with a solid thump.

FRAZER heard Ray Long's angry shout. The pockmarked Big T puncher would be piling off his pony to join the fray. Richmond drove a knee into Frazer's stomach, that was swift torture. But pounding Richmond with a left and right, he had started to wrench away when a gun-barrel descended on his head. A crazy pattern of colored lights spun before Frazer's eyes. Dazed, he struggled to get to his knees, but Long and the other man grabbed his arms and hauled him to his feet.

"Hold him like that!" ordered Richmond. He picked himself up off the ground, wiping blood from his face.

"How do you feel, Pole?" Frazer asked. One of his solid rights had caught the ramrod's puffed eye and he knew the man was in pain.

"You won't be able to feel when I'm finished with you," snarled Richmond and smashed a left to the side of Frazer's face.

Frazer tried to twist away, but Long and his companion held him firm. Then Richmond was moving in again, his fist cocked for another swing.

"So that's how it's going to be," Frazer muttered.

Richmond swung again. Frazer jerked away, dragging his captors with him. The blow missed.

"Hold him still, you fools!" Richmond raged. "Now, Frazer, we'll see how tough you are!"

He moved in close. His right arm flashed again. Once more Frazer tried to elude the punch, but the two Big T punchers held him rigid. He couldn't avoid the flurry of fists that Richmond poured into him. They came with lightning rapidity, blows that shook him and dazed him.

A slashing left hook split Frazer's lower lip. A chopping right cut a gash over his left eye. Richmond concentrated on the injured optic, widening the gash and spilling blood down Frazer's face.

"How do you like that, friend?" grated Richmond as he paused for breath.

A malevolent gleam lit up his dark eyes. He pushed his face close to Frazer's, relishing the damage he had wrought.

Despite his pain, Frazer's spirit was not cowed.

"I don't think much of you as a butcher, Pole," he muttered. "You'll have to do better."

The taunt drove Richmond to a frenzy. Again he rushed in and peppered the Double Y ramrod with slogging blows. Frazer's eye was almost shut now. A sharp left brought a puffy lump beneath the other eye. Blood filled his mouth.

He still struggled feebly, though he no longer had the strength to turn his head or rock with the blows. His head seemed like a bouncing ball. It rocked and lurched on the wide pivot of his neck, feeling like two or three heads.

Richmond's pumping fists now were nothing but a reddish blur. Frazer sagged, pulling his two captors forward. They jerked him upright again, holding him ready for another crushing right to the face.

"Had enough, Frazer?"

Richmond's voice seemed far-away, disembodied. His face vanished in a dark curtain shot through with ruddy sparks.

The feeble flicker of life still in Frazer rebelled. Richmond wanted him to beg for mercy. But Richmond nor any other man could break Tom Frazer to his will.

It took a tremendous effort to reply. But Frazer managed it.

"Keep on, Pole," he whispered. "You're not man enough to finish the job."

Richmond cursed. A long, gasping breath spilled from his lungs, but he came at Frazer once more, putting every ounce

of strength into his blows. Frazer hardly felt the bone-thudding impact. Suddenly he was falling down and down into a bottomless black void.

CHAPTER VII

Owlhoot's Vengeance

MARGO was puttering around her small flower garden when she heard a horse approaching the ranch at a slow trot. At first sight, Margo thought the animal was riderless. Then she saw that a rider was sprawled forward with his face buried in the animal's mane.

Margo leaped to her feet. That roan was Frazer's favorite saddler!

The trowel dropped from her fingers. Fear brought a hard lump into her throat as she stumbled across the yard. The roan came on, bringing into full view the ragdoll figure of Tam Frazer lashed to his saddle.

An icy hand encircled Margo's heart as she tried to lung forward to the roan. She couldn't run. Her legs seemed to be rubber. They quivered uncontrollably. It was a struggle to remain on her feet.

When the roan started to swing past the veranda, Margo leaped for the bridle and dragged the horse to a stop. She put her hand on Frazer's shoulder.

Somehow Margo's touch or the sudden cessation of movement penetrated the black veil of unconsciousness. Frazer lifted his head, his bruised face turning toward her. Margo got one look at the swollen mass of flesh that had been Frazer's face and screamed. His eyes were vacant, staring, almost lost in purplish mounds of battered skin. It was a grotesque, frightening travesty of a face, a hideous mask.

"Oh, Tom—my dear!" she cried. "What have they done to you?"

Frazer didn't hear her. His slitted eyes glazed. He slumped again into the roan's silky mane.

"Tex—Tex!" Margo screamed. "Come here! Hurry! Tom's hurt!"

Tex White came at a dead run. Margo was slashing at the ropes that held Frazer to the saddle.

"Wait, Margo!" Tex cried. "Let me handle this! Is he shot?"

"I—don't know," Margo said, her eyes shiny-wet and horror-stricken. "But he's hurt—bad."

Tex quickly severed the ropes that had bound Frazer's legs together around the roan's belly. Then he cut the thin rope that had kept his arms locked around the saddler's neck.

Frazer's body started to slide out of the kak. Tex caught him.

"My good glory—his face!" the cowboy exclaimed. "Looks like—like a horse stomped him."

"Hurry!" Margo cried. "Get him inside."

Tex shouldered Frazer's limp body and staggered to the house.

"The front room—on the couch," Margo said.

When the puncher deposited Frazer on the couch the Double Y ramrod didn't move. Margo, her cheeks putty-colored, fell to her knees beside the couch and put her hand on Frazer's chest.

"Margo, he—he isn't dead?" Tex asked fearfully.

The girl raised her head. "No—no," she said. "But I—I'm afraid—" She broke off in panic. "Tex, you've got to ride to town for the doctor! Find him, wherever he is."

Margo looked gaunt and haggard. Panic was a cold tide dashing its brutal waves against her, drowning her in dread.

"But you—will you be all right, Margo?" Tex asked.

"Don't worry about me!" she cried. "Tom may be dying! Go on, Tex! And ride like you've never ridden before!"

He dashed from the room. Margo went back to the couch. Frazer lay as still as death. Tears filled her eyes again. It would be an hour or more before Tex could return with the doctor. She had to

do something—now!

She rushed into the kitchen and put some water on the stove to heat, and hunted up some clean cloths. She bathed his face with warm water, wiping away the blood and grime. She was gentle, though her hands kept shaking, and the cold horror would not leave her.

SHE got some brandy and tried to force a little of it into Frazer's mouth. But he was completely lax and the brandy trickled out of his mouth and down his chin. She gave up and sank into a chair beside the couch.

What had happened on his ride into the badlands? Had he run into Guy Thorpe's crew? That seemed to be the only answer. That he was still alive was a miracle.

Looking at his face, an unnerving sight, she thought how big and strong and capable he had always been. He had been a rock to lean upon. There had always been something indestructible and invulnerable about him. He was so utterly without fear—a man who could be depended on to come through any trial or danger with colors flying.

That was the picture of Tom Frazer Margo had always carried with her. Now, seeing him broken and battered, she felt her own little world tumbling down around her. For only now did she admit the depth of her feeling for him. Only now did she realize that the Double Y itself was valueless to her unless Tom was there. She gazed at him, so still there, with a longing that was undisguised, and as if by the very power of her longing she might rouse him to consciousness.

The minutes dragged on with agonizing slowness. Margo's throat burned with a choking pain—from the tears that welled up in her, demanding release.

At last, after what seemed an eternity of waiting, she saw the dust cloud she had been looking for. She was waiting at the door when Tex and Dr. Fred Marlow slid from their horses.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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"Hurry, Dr. Marlow!" Margo urged. "Tom hasn't even moved."

Marlow, a middle-aged gray-haired man, patted her arm reassuringly as he pushed past her into the room where Frazer lay.

Accustomed as he was to violence and death, he drew a rasping breath when he sighted the Double Y ramrod's beaten face.

"How did this happen, Margo?" he exclaimed. "Tom's in terrible shape."

"He went after some stolen Herefords," Margo said woodenly. "He told me if he lost the trail he would do some looking around on Big T range."

The doctor frowned. "The old story. Guy Thorpe again. Had Tom dug up any evidence to show that Thorpe was behind the raid?"

"No."

"I can guess how he got that face, though," put in Tex White angrily. "He had a fight with Pole Richmond yesterday. I'm betting Tom ran into some of the Big T buckaroos and they decided to bust him up."

Marlow set his bag down, removed a stethoscope, and said: "A bullet would have been easier on him."

"Yeah," Tex said. "I reckon the Big T bunch figured the same."

An uneasy silence fell upon the room. Marlow worked with a swift and careful precision. Finally he began probing with gentle, sensitive fingers for internal injuries. When he finished he placed his stethoscope back in his bag.

"Is—is he going to be all right?" Margo queried.

"Yes, Margo," he said. "He's been through something, though. He's had no internal injuries. I can see no breaks in the bones of the face and there's no skull fracture."

Margo gripped Marlow's arm. "Then why hasn't he regained consciousness?"

"He's got a slight concussion," the doctor told her. "Rest will fix that. He should be coming around soon now. If you have some brandy—"

"Right here," Margo interrupted, going to the table where she had deposited the bottle and glass.

Marlow poured some brandy in the glass. Then he put an arm beneath Frazer's shoulders, raised him slightly and forced some of the brandy down the ramrod's throat. He asked for some water. Margo brought it. The doctor spilled some powder from one of the little envelopes in his bag into the water and forced a good portion of that into Frazer.

AFTER that he took a jar of salve from his bag.

"Spread some of this on a wet cloth," he told Margo. "and keep it on his face. It'll help take the swelling down." He passed a few envelopes of powder to the girl. "And give him one of these powders in a half glass of water every four hours . . . I'll stop by again tomorrow. In a week he'll be back to normal though it'll take longer for all the bruises to heal."

Marlow closed his bag and went out with Tex. Margo resumed her seat beside the couch. She meant to keep a constant vigil beside Frazer until he came to.

There was no change for fifteen minutes. Only the slow rise and fall of Frazer's chest indicated that life still pulsed in his veins. Then Margo saw a little color in his cheeks, at first almost unnoticeable. She bent over Frazer.

Pity stabbed her. His lips were so swollen and cracked. Tenderness welled up in her and she brought her soft, trembling lips against his in a light, feathery kiss. But as Margo drew away Frazer stirred, his eyelids opened. Margo was so startled she almost fell back in the chair.

"Margo!" Frazer's lips moved in a hoarse, choking whisper.

She dropped to her knees beside the couch and took one of his hands in hers. "I've been so afraid you'd never open your eyes again."

"It's good—to—have you here," Frazer murmured brokenly.

Margo's eyes misted with hot tears. "Tom—your face! It—it must have been terrible!"

Frazer's head ached. There was a

steady, throbbing pain in his face and in the swollen puffs of flesh around his eyes. But he forgot the pain in the magic of Margo's nearness.

"You—kissed me," he said.

Margo flushed. Frazer tried to smile. But the effort sent a cruel stab of agony through the muscles around his mouth. Margo's answer came at last.

"Yes, Tom, I—I did kiss you."

The torn slits that were Frazer's eyes lingered on Margo's face. He studied her with curious intentness as if to memorize all the details of her features lest he never see her again.

"Did you mean it?" he whispered.

"Maybe," she replied in a summer-soft tone.

Then her breath was on his cheek, her arms were around him. Frazer felt the wild beating of her heart. It was well worth any pain, he thought, to have Margo in his arms like this.

After a moment he realized that she was sobbing. She was trembling, too.

"Margo—Margo," he said. "It—it's all right."

She lifted her tear-streaked face and said in a choking voice: "I am a baby. But seeing you so beaten, Tom, I just couldn't help it."

"Knowing you care makes it easier," he said. "But you haven't told me how I got here. I remember going down. The rest is just a blank."

Quickly Margot told how the roan had trotted into the ranch yard with his body lashed to the saddle.

Frazer's eyes hardened. "They went to a lot of trouble."

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

ZORRO'S
FIGHT for LIFE
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"Who was it?" Margo asked quickly. "Thorpe's crowd?"

"Pole Richmond, Ray Long and another man—on Big T range." Then haltingly he gave her a brief account of the beating he had received.

Margot sat stone still. "You mean Long and the other man held you while Richmond kept hitting you?" she asked, horrified.

"Yeah."

"Oh, my dear!" Margo cried.

Again Frazer tried to smile. But the effort cost too much in pain. He lifted a hand to his swollen face, let his fingers trace the bruised skin. "Have you got a small mirror, Margo?" he asked.

GOING to the next room she came back with a small wall mirror and held it so Frazer could stare at his reflection. The sight of his own face was as much of a shock to him as it had been to Margo. Cold lights flickered in his slitted blue eyes.

"They really did a job on me," he said in a voice roughened by rage.

"Tom, you shouldn't have gone up there alone," Margo told him. "But thank heaven the trouble is all over now."

"This is only the beginning," Frazer told her grimly. "We've got Winston holding that note and Thorpe rustling Double Y beefs. I aim to stop them if I can."

"But what can you do?" cried Margo.

"I don't know—yet. But I do know I've only begun to fight. Richmond is going to be plenty sorry he didn't finish me."

Frazer's words thrilled Margo even as they filled her with fear, for she was positive that the next time the Big T and the Double Y clashed it would be over smoking guns. Harry Yorke was dead, and Tom was horribly beaten. That left Tex White, Hal Cooper and herself. Two men and a girl in a knock-down fight for survival.

"Tom," Margo said, "I'd rather give up now than risk more killing."

"No!" he said. "While we've still got cows on Double Y grass and three men we'll fight!"

CHAPTER VIII

Code of the West

JUST three days after the beating Frazer was permitted to get out of bed. He had fretted so much that Dr. Marlow had finally agreed to his sitting in a chair on the veranda, though as far as Tom was concerned, he was ready to ride again.

The sight of Hal and Tex riding out on range chores made him so restless he couldn't sit still. He was pacing slowly up and down the veranda when Sheriff Fred Landon pulled in from town. Landon was a thin, wiry man, medium tall, and bow-legged from long years spent in the saddle. Crow's-foot wrinkles made deep tracks around his gray eyes. His cheeks were sunken, his face long and narrow.

Frazer was happy to see the lawman.

"Howdy, Fred! What brings you out here?"

"Heard you've had some trouble," Landon murmured in a dry voice. He peered at Frazer's face. "Who stepped on your face?"

Frazer said, "Wish you'd been here four days ago. We lost a big herd of Herefords, and somebody got Harry Yorke."

Landon shook his head. "I'm mighty sorry, Tom," he said. "I've been busy on a stagecoach robbery. Just pulled into Two Forks this morning. Got any ideas about the rustling or Yorke's shooting?"

"The same old cry," Frazer told him.

"Thorpe again?"

"Yeah, but no evidence."

"I'll be hanged if this county isn't getting too big for one man to handle," the sheriff said irritably. "Heard you had a ruckus with Pole Richmond in town. That face of yours got anything to do with it?"

"Plenty," said Frazer, and told all that had led up to his beating.

"You fixing to prefer charges against that Richmond?" asked Landon.

"Fred, you know me better than that," Frazer retorted.

"Reckon I do, Tom. But you're lucky they didn't drill you full of slugs."

"That's where Richmond made a mistake," Frazer said flatly. "There'll be a different story the next time I see him."

"Watch yourself," Landon warned. Hearing Margo moving about somewhere inside the house, his thin brows drew into a frown. "I'd like to get them beefs back for Margo. Reckon I'll take a pasear up in the hills and see if I can pick up anything."

"It's a cold trail, Fred," Frazer informed him. "And you'll find all sign gone by the time you hit the river ford."

Landon's lips set stubbornly. "I'll have a look anyhow. So long."

Frazer watched him mount and swing off at a fast lope toward the hills.

At ten the next morning the sheriff reappeared. His long, thin face was morose and unhappy. He had spent most of the previous day hunting for the stolen Double Y cattle.

But he had met with failure.

"It's got me beat," he said, "where those cows could have gone."

"I'll find out," Frazer told him grimly, "if I have to spend all my nights in the saddle."

"What do you mean?"

"The rustlers aren't finished yet. We've still got cows left. I aim to night-hawk one of our remaining herds and be on hand when the next raid is pulled."

The sheriff looked doubtful. "I wish you luck. If you need me, I'll be in Two Forks for the next few days."

He lifted his reins and trotted wearily out of the yard.

An hour later Bill Corey rode in. Frazer had been wondering why Bill hadn't been over to see him.

"For Pete's sake, Tom, what happened to your face?" he said as Frazer turned to greet him.

"You should have seen it three days ago," Frazer said wryly, and once more told of his run-in with Pole Richmond.

THE sidewinder!" Corey raged. "Killing is too good for him."

And deep inside Corey a hollow, accusing voice whispered:

"You know all about it. Haven't you been with Richmond and the Big T crew driving a bunch of rebranded Double Y cows over the state line? There's your best friend beaten up by the sneaking hard-cases you ride with!"

The accusing voice had been nagging Corey more than usual lately. He had his moments of savage self-abasement when he felt miserable and ashamed at the way he made his living. He hadn't any right to the friendship of a man like Tom Frazer. Every time he rode with Thorpe's owl-hooters he betrayed Frazer or one of his other neighbors. The rustling was bad enough. But when Harry Yorke had been killed, that was something he hadn't counted on—something he wanted no part of.

And now they'd hit directly at Tom. Corey did not need to be told what a hideous experience Tom's must have been. And he'd had to listen to Richmond tell about it, conscious that Richmond was relishing the story all the more because he knew it would burn him, Corey, up.

Anger raged in Corey. The beating had been much worse than he imagined it. It would be months before Frazer's face healed completely. Some of the scars he would carry for the rest of his life. Richmond had a killing coming to him!

Corey picked up the reins which had laid slack along his pony's mane. The sight of Frazer's battered face filled him with a sickening feeling of self-reproach. If he stayed any longer he'd be spilling his insides to Frazer.

"Well," he said, "got to get back home. If you need me, I'll be around."

"Sure, Bill, and thanks."

Frazer, a little puzzled and hurt by Corey's hurried departure, turned toward the corral. A somber sadness filled him. The old free and easy days were gone. Trouble was on the land. And the friendship that had once brought Corey and himself closely together was coming apart at the seams. . . .

Corey did not go home. Sticking to the wagon road until a wooded ridge hid him from the view of anybody at the Double Y, he turned into a twisting game trail through a stretch of heavy timber.

He rode steadily for twenty minutes, keeping off the ridges, now clattering through a high-walled canyon, now trotting briskly across high mesas. Finally, more than three miles south of the Dunbar River ford, Corey rode out of a patch of trees into a clearing. A small line cabin jutted against a rocky, twenty-foot bluff. Corey's eyes lit up in expectancy as he caught sight of a ground-tied pony.

The cabin had once been used as a line shack by Margo's father when the Double Y had run big herds. Now it was abandoned. A lean-to in the rear had been blown down in a high wind. The fallen boards were piled in a jumbled heap, rotting under the hot sun.

Corey dismounted. As he walked to the front door it was opened and Ella Winston stood there.

"Where have you been?" she asked petulantly.

"What kind of a greeting do you call that?" Corey demanded. He hauled her against his chest with a wide sweep of his arms. It was a long and thorough kiss before he released her.

"Bill," she said, "do you realize I've been up here the last three afternoons waiting for you?"

He held her loosely in his arms, staring down at her. She was a pleasant armful.

"Glad to see you're still faithful," he said with a laugh.

"It's not funny!" Ella stamped her foot. "I take a chance every time I ride away from the Circle W. It's not as easy as it once was to meet you here."

"You've got to admit I'm worth it, Ella." The mocking, arrogant light she loved so well danced in Corey's eyes.

"What about me?" she said.

"You're a mighty pretty girl, Ella, and you're not good for my peace of mind." He kissed her again.

"Why weren't you here yesterday?"

Corey felt uncomfortable over the lie he told her, but she was hardly listening.

"Bill, let's run away," she suddenly pleaded.

"With what? We'd need a good stake."

"You could sell the ranch."

"It's mortgaged to the hilt. Besides, I owe money and—"

SHE stopped him with a wave of her hand.

"I know, I know. You've never had a cent and you never will."

Corey was unmoved. "You've told me that before. That's why you married Winston."

"Sometimes I hate you!" she flamed at him. "If you didn't waste your time playing poker all the time and would tend to your business you might have something."

"Life is too short," he said.

Ella pounded his chest with her fists until he caught her wrists and cautioned; "Take it easy, Ella."

She strained to get free. Her eyes were suddenly hard.

"Bill," she said, "I wish I didn't love you. I—I can't stand much more. Winston's always got his hands on me!" She shivered at the memory of what she had to endure.

"You knew what you were doing," Corey drawled.

"How can you be so callous about it?" Ella flared.

Corey still imprisoned her wrists. "It's too late now."

"No!" Ella was on the thin edge of hysteria. "If you won't go with me, I'll go alone. I can't stay with Winston. Just to have him touch me, fills me with loathing."

"All right," Corey said. "I'll get the money."

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"When?" Ella demanded. "Tomorrow?"

Corey thought a minute. "That's kind of fast but I reckon it can be done."

"Where will you get the money?" Ella asked.

"What do you care so long as I get it?"

"But Bill, I don't want you to—" She broke off, not sure of what shape her fears were taking.

Corey patted her shoulder. "I've got some money coming to me for a job of work. But you've got to be sure you want to pull up stakes. Once we go there'll be no coming back."

"I know, I know, Bill." She was eager and hopeful. "I was wrong, Bill. Money doesn't mean a thing if you can't stand the sight of the man you married."

Corey realized how much he wanted to go away with Ella. And to have her he'd have to throw up everything in Two Forks. But he told himself he had nothing anyway. Here was his chance to get out before he walked into a hangnoose for rustling. Besides, Ella was worth the risk. They were two of a kind, wild and unscrupulous. They had to take what they could get out of life and forget tomorrow.

"How soon can you be ready to pull out, Ella?" he asked.

"Right now. I'll go the way I am."

"No. I need time to get some *dinero* together. We'll meet here tomorrow. Can you get away from the Circle W without being followed?"

"Leave it to me, Bill. I'll find a way." With an eager cry she flung her arms around his neck. "Oh Bill, I'm so glad!"

If Corey had any doubts about the wisdom of the course he had elected to pursue, Ella's kiss was all the answer he needed. Of course there would be the devil to pay if there was any slip-up. The West had its own thorough way of dealing with a man who stole another man's wife. And Winston would ride to the end of the world to bring Ella back if he ever picked up their trail. So they would have to move fast and far.

Realizing that, his face was sober when he swung up on his horse and rode swiftly away.

CHAPTER IX

The Secret of Vanishing Herds

ELLA waited a considerable time before she emerged from the cabin and closed the door behind her. Excitement flooded her whole being. The next twenty-four hours were going to seem an eternity. She hurried her horse, anxious now to get back to the Circle W before Winston or any of his hands rode in from the range.

She was just trotting out of the trees when a horseman appeared out of the brush. She had raised her quirt, to slam it down against the flank of her pony when she recognized Tom Frazer.

He had saddled a horse shortly after Corey left the Double Y and had struck aimlessly toward the hills. As he had ridden on and on, just for the fine joy of being in the saddle again, he could not have told how he had come to wander into the game trail which had led him to this line cabin he hadn't seen in months.

He was as surprised as Ella. But his surprise changed to anger when he realized what must have brought her to this rough hill country.

"So you're still seeing Bill," he said, pulling his roan to a halt beside her.

Ella's spirits were soaring now and she felt as if she could face anything.

"How did you guess?" she asked laughingly.

"Only one reason why you'd be quartering around this section."

Ella leaned nearer, her eyes dancing. "Don't tell me you're jealous, Tom." Then she gave him the full force of her long-lashed eyes. "Have you forgotten we used to meet here?" she asked softly.

"I want to forget it," he said.

"Looks like Margo's really got you," Ella said still smiling, though some of the amusement was gone and her red lips had grown a little hard. "Well, I wish you luck."

She lifted her reins, ready to ride off. Frazer pulled her back, hauled her roughly around until his face was scant inches from her own.

"Ella," he said firmly, "it's time you got some sense. You made your choice when you married Winston. Stick to it if you don't want to get Bill killed."

"There's nothing to worry about, Tom," Ella told him, an odd light in her eyes. Without warning she leaned out of the saddle and kissed him on the lips. "Tom, I—"

She jerked back as a branch crackled in the brush. She glanced over Frazer's shoulder.

"Oh, hello, Margo," she said lightly, "Keeping tabs on your foreman?"

Margo rode into the clearing, her face chalk-white with rage and resentment. She ignored Ella.

"Nice ride, Tom?" she asked.

Hot blood rushed to Frazer's face. He heard Ella's faintly mocking laugh as she galloped off into the trees.

There was a stricken look in Margo's eyes. "You don't ever give up, do you," she said drily, "Not even when it means breaking up a marriage."

"It's not like you think," Frazer said miserably.

"No?" Margo was remote. "How is it, then?"

Frazer could not tell her the truth. He could not let Corey down, set him up as a target for Winston's wrath. Still, only the truth would convince Margo, that he, Tom was not keeping a clandestine rendezvous with Ella Winston.

"I ran into Ella her only by chance," he said doggedly. "You've got to believe that, Margo."

Margo sat stiffly in her saddle, smarting with humiliation. "And if I don't?"

"Then there is nothing more to say."

A desolate feeling swept through Frazer with the urge to take Margo in his arms. For one look at her cold, still face told him there was no chance of that.

"I've been a fool," Margo said bitterly. "But I know when I've had enough." Her tone sharpened. "And from now on the Double Y can get along without you, Mr. Tom Frazer! You're fired!"

FRAZER pushed the roan toward Margo, he reached for her hand. She raised her quirt threateningly.

"Get away from me!" But there was heartbreak in the cry that was torn from her.

"Margo, you've got to listen to me!" Frazer said.

"No!"

"But the ranch. You need every man now and—"

"I'll get another man," she assured him, fighting savagely for control and against the stinging sensation at the back of her eyes. "Your gear will be waiting for you at the ranch."

Frazer's jaw tightened. "You're sure you want it this way?" he demanded.

Margo's answer came in a headlong rush. "Yes, this is the way I want it."

"All right." He yanked down the brim of his sombrero, shadowing his bleak blue eyes. "So long," he said and rode off —toward the rugged ramparts of the Indian Head Mountains.

Margo watched him fade into the trees, then with a strangled sob turned her pony about to head for home.

Frazer went recklessly crashing through the trees. Linking him with Ella Winston while leaving Bill Corey free of suspicion was maddening. Yet he was helpless to defend himself. And he could never have believed that Margo had so little trust in him.

Well, maybe he was no longer with the Double Y, but Margo couldn't stop his private investigations into rustling. And Harry Yorke's killing had become his personal concern. He had been pushed too far. It was time to fight back.

The game he meant to play would be a perilous one. But he had lived too long with danger even to consider the risks involved. Charged with a savage excitement, he was determined to win.

Swinging out of the trees, he headed directly to the Dunbar River ford where he reined in the roan at the sun-dappled stream, to study the willows on the opposite bank and the rolling country beyond it.

But he did not cross. Instead he decided to explore the thick-growing brush that cluttered his own side of the stream. Just why, he couldn't have said. Certainly the cattle couldn't have been driven through that dense brush.

It was slow going. Branches whipped against Frazer's face and shoulders. Thorny bushes plucked at his trousers.

After a mile of this steady slogging he was about to swing farther inland to look for easier travel when the brush thinned out. Quickly he decided to push on.

He was almost positive that the rustlers would not have driven the cattle west across the river. In that direction lay the county seat of Dunbar and many ranches. A big risk would be run in trying to push stolen cows through such carefully patrolled range.

No, the logical assumption was that the rustlers had gone north with the beef. But which side of the river they had chosen for their route was a question. To the north lay the numerous canyons of the Indian Heads. To the north, also, lay Guy Thorpe's holdings. In Frazer's own aimless search of Big T range he had seen only Big T cows. However, there was plenty of rough country around the Big T, ideal hiding spots.

Frazer was still riding close to the river bank when suddenly the roan skidded on something slippery. Frazer glanced idly down. What he saw made him pull the roan to a halt. He piled out of the saddle and hunkered down to examine the slender, rounded pole over which his mount had stumbled. One end of the pole was jagged where it had been split off. But the other end tapered to a small handle, worn smooth by much handling.

SEARCHING in the brush, Frazer soon came upon the other half of the broken pole. One of the ends of this sec-

tion was muddy. The pole had been used to propel a boat—like the long poles used by flatboat and barge owners in the early days of Missouri and Mississippi River travel. And that brought up something important.

Because of the unusual length of this wooden shaft it could only have been used on some flatboat or barge. Being found close to the river here—and recently broken—meant that someone in the Two Forks country owned a flatboat. Frazer had never seen any barge traffic on the Dunbar River, and besides, a mile north where the river passed through a mountain gulch, was a falls.

Frazer slowly let the broken pole slip from his fingers. He knew how the stolen Double Y cattle had vanished! They had been loaded on flatboats from a spot near the ford, and then poled upriver to some hidden landing, and all tracks where the cows boarded the barges had been erased. The scheme was virtually fool-proof and only a lucky accident had opened his eyes.

Frazer remounted and pushed on. His job right now was to find where the cattle were unloaded. He was positive the beef would be taken only far enough by boat to ditch all sign and throw off any possibility of successful pursuit.

As Frazer forced the roan through the tangle of brush, gradually a faint murmur rose in the distance—the muted roar of the falls. In another quarter-mile Frazer reached a narrow slough almost hidden from the river by the closely growing trees. The water looked green and sluggish. He looked into the murky depths, trying to gauge how deep the water was. The weed-filled surface gave no clue, but all at once Frazer was sure that here was the rustlers' avenue of escape. Dismounting, he led the roan along the bank of the slough for half a mile to the end of the inlet. And there he found a small pier. Tied up beside it and covering most of the water's surface was a big flatboat. As Frazer circled the end of the slough he came upon a smaller barge pulled half out of the water and hidden in thick brush.

Cautiously Frazer studied the trees, looking for signs of a guard. He didn't want to blunder into a trap, now that he had hit upon the rustlers' secret jumping-off place.

However, a minute's careful survey assured him that he was alone. Horses and cattle had left their marks on the splintered wood of the pier, and hoof sign led away from the slough up a short slope.

Checking his Colt, Frazer climbed into the saddle again and swung back toward the river. He moved on upstream until the brawling sound of the falls rose to a roar. Finally he broke from a patch of trees and saw the cataract forty feet above him.

A stiff breeze whipped spray into his face as he studied the deep pool, ringed by dark rocks below the falls. Water came pouring into the basin in a white-laced cascade.

Frazer backed away and curveted the roan up a slanting trail through the trees. It was a stiff climb. Then, gaining higher ground, he followed the racing course of the rapids.

A quarter mile farther on he almost sent the roan crashing into a rowboat half-hidden in some weeds. The small craft, he decided, was doubtless used by the rustlers to patrol the river during raiding operations.

Now, with a growing sense of urgency, Frazer left the river and headed inland, to a broken terrain criss-crossed by canyons and ravines. There he picked up the trail of the cattle from the slough, and followed it until all sign vanished on stony ground. On a distant high slope he saw a few grazing cattle he believed were Big T strays. Certainly Thorpe would not let any stolen critters wander around in such fashion.

FRAZER's task was still a monumental one. It was logical to assume that the renegades would hide the cattle in some dead-end canyon. But which canyon? There were hundreds of gulches and defiles in the area. One guess was as good as another. Frazer would have to examine each one systematically no matter how

much time it took. Well, he had plenty of time. He no longer was working for the Double Y.

With a bitter twist of his mouth he pushed the roan into a high-walled canyon that ran parallel to the river. The hard clatter of the horse's hoofs seemed to echo thunderously from wall to wall. He was certainly providing any riders in the canyon with ample warning of his approach.

He rode for ten minutes without reaching the canyon's end and without finding any signs of grass or water, gave it up, and doggedly rode back to proceed to the next canyon. This proved to be a short, dead-end affair. The third gulch he tried widened after a quarter of a mile into a small grassy basin serviced by a thin spring. Here again he met with failure.

The roan was beginning to tire from his long exertions when Frazer's persistence was finally rewarded. He had entered a brush-choked defile about three miles from the river when he detected the sound of a bawling steer.

Eyes narrowing, he pushed on through the canyon. The walls gradually fell away. Gun in hand, he rode around a bend and found himself in a grass-filled cup several hundred yards wide and about a half-mile long. In this basin grazed a herd of cattle.

He pushed on cautiously, for there was no cover should he run into any hostile riders. A rapid survey of the grazing cattle showed him that most of the animals were Herefords, about three hundred in the bunch.

Most of the animals carried the Double Y brand, but about a dozen of them had been re-branded to a Double M. He also saw some cows that belonged to Ad Simmons and Dale Roush, small ranchers in the Two Forks vicinity. And off to one side were the remains of a recent branding fire.

Fearing that the rustlers might return at any moment Frazer decided to clear out fast, though he still lacked proof that would definitely identify the renegades. He was sure Thorpe's Big T outfit was behind the raids. But the Double M brand, an iron new to him, did not implicate Thorpe. It probably had been chosen because it could easily be fashioned from a Double Y. Other strange brands no doubt had been used on the Simmons and Roush cattle. Yet nothing Frazer saw in this basin would have any actual value as evidence unless he could trap the renegades in the act of altering the brands.

The best thing for him to do now was ride to town for the sheriff and bring the lawman back to the hills with him. After that it would be just a matter of waiting to catch the rustlers red-handed.

Frazer headed for the canyon's entrance, and soon was riding between high rock walls along a trail barely wide enough to accommodate four horsemen riding abreast.

He was about three hundred yards from the entrance when he heard the clatter of hoofs ahead of him. Frazer realized instantly that the defile was a trap! To go back to the basin would expose him to even greater peril since there was absolutely no cover there. No matter how many riders were coming toward him, his best chance was to try to make a dash through them.

The hoofbeats up ahead increased their rhythm. The riders had heard the roan's hoofs. Frazer, eyes bright with excitement, pulled his Colt from his holster and fed steel to the roan's flanks.

In a wild dash the roan carried Frazer around a rocky bend in the canyon and face to face with Ray Long and the unnamed Big T puncher who had held one of the Double Y ramrod's arms while Pole Richmond had administered his systematic beating to him. Long was carrying a branding iron across the pommel of his saddle.

Frazer jerked back on the roan's reins. "Grab some sky, gents!" he yelled.

Ray Long cursed and dropped the branding iron. But the other Big T man grabbed his gun and sent a bullet burning past Frazer's face. Even as the echo reverberated in the canyon Frazer laid his answering fire full upon the rene-

gade's chest. The puncher screamed once, before death stifled his cry.

CHAPTER X

Escape to Peril

RAY LONG'S face turned pasty as he heard the thud of the heavy slug enter his companion's body. With his gun half out he suddenly flung his hands into the air.

"So you don't want to try your luck?" demanded Frazer. There was no mercy in his eyes, and Long saw that. "Throw down your gun!"

The Big T puncher carefully flung his weapon to the ground.

"Now climb down and pick up that branding iron you dropped," Frazer directed. "And keep away from your gun! My friend, you and I are riding into Two Forks to see the sheriff. I reckon you've got a little story to tell him about stolen cattle."

"I won't be telling it today!" the puncher said. "Here come Pole and the rest of the boys!"

From far-off, but distinct, came the sound of approaching hoofs. Danger throbbed in the ominous beat of those hoofs. Frazer had lingered too long, and unless he moved fast he'd be finished. He whipped his gun into line again.

"Get goin!" he ordered. "We're making a run for it."

Long shook his head. "I like it here."

The barrel of Frazer's Colt shifted a fraction of an inch. There was a solid crash, then the Big T puncher cried out in pain and clapped a hand to his left ear. A trickle of blood spilled through his fingers.

"Your ear is still there," said Frazer grimly, "but it won't be after my next shot. Now ride!"

The man gigged into a run. Frazer followed on his captive's heels.

With the clatter of their flight along the defile Frazer couldn't tell how near those other riders were. But he meant to go smashing right through them if he could.

They burst from the canyon entrance without encountering the other horsemen. But less than a quarter of a mile away six horsemen were speeding along at a rapid clip. In the lead was Pole Richmond.

"Pole," yelled the Big T puncher with Frazer. "It's Tom Frazer! Come on!"

Once more Frazer's gun spoke. He missed, but the hot slug passed so close to the puncher's face that in blind panic he slammed his horse into a gallop.

"Try that again," grated Frazer as he pounded after the man, "and I'll cut your backbone in two!"

Gunfire erupted behind them. The slugs fell short, for the distance was still too great, but Frazer saw the Big T riders lift their horses into a straining run.

For a mile Frazer, herding his captive ahead of him, kept the lead, hoping to reach the timber farther south. Once in the trees he could lose his pursuit.

Then glancing back once more, he saw Pole Richmond wave two of his men off at a tangent. They were cutting sharply to the south, apparently anticipating his intention. The other men were gaining, too, because the roan, already ridden hard most of the afternoon, was beginning to tire.

Six-guns began booming again. Then into that salvo of Colt fire came the flat report of a rifle. The bullet sang over Frazer's head, but he knew that although shooting a rifle from the back of a galloping horse was apt to be pretty much of a chance there was always the possibility that a lucky hit would bring him down.

Frazer bent low over the roan, urging the weary animal on in a desperate sprint. For some minutes the roan drew away from the pursuit, with the Big T man ahead because his horse was comparatively fresh.

FRAZER saw the thin line of trees and brush that marked the river above the falls. With Richmond's men bent on blocking his retreat to the south, he considered angling for the river. But brush below the falls would slow him up. Richmond's punchers could spread out and corner him.

No, the only way was to cut south and try to beat off the two Big T riders who were riding to pin him against the river. Savagely yelling, "Swing south!" to his captive Big T puncher, they rode hard with the din of six-guns and rifles becoming louder and more insistent. Frazer saw that Richmond was the man using the rifle. Even as he looked back he saw a puff of smoke issue from the long barrel and heard the angry whine of the slug over his head.

Frazer was just getting within six-gun range of the two riders on his flank when four more Big T punchers rode into view from the trees dead ahead. They dug in their spurs and joined the chase.

Frazer was completely cut off now! But with his savage will to resist that was the very core of his being, when he realized that he was at the end of his rope, he jerked up his gun, fired at his nearest pursuer, saw him go down, and went racing toward the river. A bullet drilled the mount of his captive and the man went down with his horse.

Richmond's main bunch was driving hard, firing as they came, intent on killing him before he reached the river. Frazer barely managed to stay out of pistol range. But he could feel the roan's labored breathing, detected a falter in the powerful stride. Once the animal stumbled, but Frazer's voice and the touch of his bootheels sent the roan gallantly on.

The first scattered trees and brush loomed up. Frazer plunged into their meager protection. But Richmond's bunch was right behind him, yelling triumphantly as they spread out in a wide skirmish line. They could trap him if he veered right or left.

Then he remembered the rowboat he had seen half-concealed in the weeds, but escape in it seemed a bleak alternative. With the river hurtling along here in a narrow, rock-strewn channel that ended in the falls, he doubted if he'd get far.

But since there was no other way, he had to make a try at it. At the river's edge the roan's front legs buckled, but before the mount went down Frazer had flung himself from the saddle and was dashing into the weeds.

He found the rowboat, but there were no oars. Grabbing the craft's heavy stern he pushed the boat into the shallows, but a withering fusillade of lead forced him back.

The roan had staggered to its feet again. Half-crazed the weary mount plunged toward the oncoming Big T riders. It crashed drunkenly into Pole Richmond's mount, and as the ramrod fought to bring his piebald under control the roan caromed off into the rider beside Richmond. Into that turmoil of trumpeting horses and screaming men Frazer poured four fast shots, then leaped for the rowboat, shoved it into the river and scrambled aboard. Behind him the Big T riders rode furiously toward the river bank.

Face down across the center board, Frazer paddled frantically with his bare hands toward mid-stream. Bullets thudded into the frail craft, through the sides. One ricocheted off his boot, ripping a gash in the leather. Another missed the top of his head by inches.

Suddenly the fierce current caught the rowboat and hurled it headlong downstream. The boat spun in a twisting arc, went rushing on in a whirl of white-laced spray.

Although Frazer didn't venture to lift his head he knew the Big T punchers were racing along the river bank. Sporadic gunfire raked the boat, then abruptly dwindled.

TOM FRAZER risked a quick glance toward shore. Thickening brush had finally forced the riders to pull up. Dismounted, Richmond was lining the sights of his rifle on the rowboat. Frazer ducked.

He heard the crash of the Winchester.

Wood splintered beside him, then the boat reeled around a bend out of range.

The roar of the approaching falls was an ominous rumbling. Sitting up, Frazer saw that he was squarely in the middle of the rapids. The frail rowboat was like a live thing in the leaping waves. It rocked and heaved, twisting and turning, flung about from one capricious cross-current to another. Trees and brush on the shore were racing by at express speed.

Frazer began paddling in a wild effort to turn the boat toward shore, but that would have been useless, even with oars. The current that pushed and tugged it would not be denied.

The boat crashed into a submerged rock with a jar that knocked Frazer down. Before he could rise water was pouring through a hole in the boat's bottom. And the lip of the falls was only yards away!

The river boiled in fury. A giant hand seemed to grasp the boat and hurl it forward in a screaming arc. Frazer hung on to the sides, his head whirling at the tremendous speed of the craft. A great roaring sound dinned in his ears. Then he saw the falls rushing to meet him.

In one great bound the rowboat lunged through the deep trough of the rapids. It skidded over the brink into empty space, carrying Frazer with it. . . .

AFTER leaving the old line shack where he had met Ella Winston, Bill Corey rode back to his own small spread. He couldn't get away with Ella until he obtained some money. There was only one place to get that—at the Big T. But at this time of day Thorpe would not be there.

There was just one thing Corey wanted to do before he left this range—kill Pole Richmond. He'd determined to do that the moment he had seen Frazer's battered face. Maybe in some way that could atone for his own treachery to Frazer, the very thought of which sickened him now.

Corey cleaned out the drawers of his desk, destroying all worthless papers. The place was so run-down, he would be leaving nothing valuable. He fed his stock for the last time, reminding himself that if he and Ella caught the nine o'clock express in Dunbar tomorrow night they would be well out of the state by dawn, far ahead of pursuit.

Late in the afternoon, Corey rode toward the hills. He avoided all the main trails, not wishing to meet anyone on this journey.

The purple shadows of dusk were moving down the hills when he rode into the Big T ranch yard. Only a few horses scampered around in the corral. That meant most of the Big T crew was still out. Guy Thorpe stamped out onto the porch when Corey racked up his pony at the hitching-rail.

"What brings you here, Corey?" Thorpe queried, a slight edge to his voice.

Corey mounted the steps and said, "Let's talk inside."

Thorpe gave him a queer glance, then shrugged and walked into the spacious but barely furnished front room. A lamp with a smoke-grimed chimney stood on a table near an old roll-top desk. A worn rug covered the board floor. There was a torn leather sofa, a few straight-backed chairs, an Indian blanket tacked to the wall. And beside the desk was an old iron safe.

"Let's have it," said Thorpe, pausing near the table to riffle the pages of a musty mail order catalogue.

"I want two things," said Corey, his voice dead-level. "The first is Pole Richmond."

Thorpe looked up, his eyes suddenly alert and wary.

"What do you want him for?"

Corey said flatly; "I'm going to kill him."

Thorpe stared at the steel-bright glitter in Corey's eyes, and laughed raucously.

"I reckon you've seen your good friend, Tom Frazer."

"I have," snapped Corey. "That's why Richmond is going to die." Fury sharpened his tone. "Tom's face looked as if a team of horses had walked over it. If I'd known he'd taken that kind of beating I'd have got Richmond last week on that cattle drive."

GUY THORPE drew himself up to his full height, looked Corey over.

"You figure you're big enough to handle Richmond?" he inquired.

"Yeah," grated Corey, "and anybody else that lays a hand on Tom Frazer."

"Of course, stealing cattle from the ranch he ramrods is all right in your book?" Thorpe asked drily.

"Forget that," Corey said. "I'm kind of late but not too late to straighten a few things out. Which reminds me that you owe me five hundred dollars for my share in that stolen cattle sale Richmond made the other day."

Thorpe's knife-thin lips twisted in a faint smile. "You'll have to wait a while."

"I want it now."

"The money isn't here."

Corey's skin drew taut over his jawbone. "What about the safe?"

"It's empty," said Thorpe. Wariness flickered in his eyes now.

"Suppose we have a look, Guy," Corey said, his tone gentle as a summer wind, yet holding a definite threat. "And while we're at it you can pay me my share in that raid on the Double Y the other night."

All the overbearing insolence that was in Thorpe's nature now cropped up. "You've got your gall, Corey. I'll pay you when I'm blame good and ready."

Corey leaned forward, his narrowed eyes fixed like a hot steel drill on the rancher. "Maybe you didn't hear me, Guy," he said. "I want to be paid tonight —right now."

Thorpe's mouth twitched. A mean look stole over his features. "You don't give me orders. I still run the Big T."

"Run it all you're a-mind to!" Corey flung into his face. "But you still owe me money. I figure it to be a thousand altogether."

"Why the hurry? Another poker game?" Thorpe's question was tinged with mockery, unfriendly.

"No, I'm pulling out," said Corey.

Thorpe showed surprise, unbelief. "Say that again."

"You heard me."

Thorpe's nostrils quivered. His eyes were suddenly narrow and threatening. "Nobody pulls out of this game unless I say so," he said flatly.

They were getting nearer and nearer the breaking point. Each man knew it. Every nerve in Corey's body screamed a warning. Thorpe's big body bowed a trifle more. His elbow was hooked. He was ready to dive for his gun at Corey's first move. But Corey remained immobile.

Seconds dragged on with almost interminable slowness. Corey was not afraid of Thorpe. He had no liking for the man, either, and was coldly agreeable to trading lead with him. But he was enough of a realist to understand that if he matched shots with Thorpe now he might forfeit his chance to kill Richmond. And, for the moment, Richmond was more important.

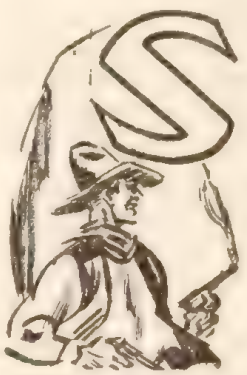
However, Corey did not hesitate over making his reply to the Big T owner.

"You may run this outfit," he drawled, "but you don't run me. I'm a free agent."

"That's where you're wrong," Thorpe told him, cold and antagonistic. "Nobody quits in this game. That includes you. You know too much. The only way you or anybody else will pull out is feet first. Is that understood?"

CHAPTER XI

Flotsam



SUDDENLY Corey knew he had reached the point beyond which he or any other man could be pushed. He had gone too far with Thorpe to back down. It was fight or crawl, and he would rather die than crawl. But he wanted Ella Winston, and to get her he had to have his money.

"Do you figure you can make that little remark of yours stick?" he asked Thorpe in a drawling voice, though excitement was pouring through him in a torrid tide.

Guy Thorpe's sneering smile was like

a slap in the face. "Why don't you try me and see?" he murmured.

The ball of fire in Corey's chest burst. His right hand streaked toward his gun as did Thorpe. But before the fingers of either closed around the stock, horsemen drummed into the yard, making a fierce clatter.

Corey backed against the wall as the thump of boots came on the porch steps. Dismally he realized—and regretted—that he had not forced the issue with Thorpe before the arrival of the Big T crew. Thorpe would never let him out of the place alive now.

The Big T owner called loudly; "Come on in, Pole! We've got company."

The tall, lanky ramrod strode into the room. Behind him came Ray Long and two other men. The rest of the crew, talking and shouting, were dismounting at the corral.

"What's going on here, Guy?" Richmond asked. "You look like you're ready to eat Corey."

Thorpe gestured Richmond across the room to a spot where he would be flanking Corey. Long and the other two men spread out in like manner, eyes intent on Corey. All sensed that something was wrong.

"Corey can wait," said Thorpe, "until I find out what kept you so long, Pole."

"We ran into some trouble in the hills," said Richmond. "Frazer stumbled on our cattle hideout."

Thorpe's eyes darkened. "I reckon you'd better let me have the whole story."

"Not much to it," said Richmond. "We were going up there to rebrand some Double Y beefs. Long and Harkins rode ahead. They ran into Frazer in the canyon as Frazer was coming out. Frazer drilled Harkins."

"What were you doing while all the shooting was going on, Ray?"

"I was toting a running iron," Long said, reddening. "By the time I got rid of it and went for my gun Frazer had the drop on me."

Thorpe snorted, and swung back to Richmond questioningly.

"Well," said the ramrod, "Ray says Frazer aimed to take him into town and make him talk about them beefs to the sheriff."

"Fine," snapped the rancher. "But you took care of Frazer?"

"Just about."

Thorpe's eyebrows drew together. "What does that mean?"

"We chased him to the river," Richmond said curtly. "He went over the falls in that old rowboat we've been keeping in the bushes. Stop worrying, Guy. Where Frazer is now he'll do no more talking."

Corey suddenly broke his silence. In a lightning-fast move he dragged out his two Colts.

"I figure you'll be keeping Tom company in a few minutes," he said grimly. "Don't anybody move or Richmond dies right now."

Richmond's elbow crooked, his fingers fanned out, but he didn't attempt to draw. A grayish tinge came to his gaunt, sallow cheeks.

"What's in your craw, Corey?" he asked tightly.

Thorpe laughed. "Can't you guess, Pole? He's squaring accounts for Frazer."

"That's right, Richmond," said Corey. "Tom was the best friend a man ever had. I've treated him like dirt. But you're going to pay for that beating you gave him and for sending him to his death!"

Corey's face was like sun-bleached parchment. His rage and grief were like a corroding poison. Tom Frazer had always seemed too much of a man to die. He was like a rock—something that was always there, solid and invincible. But now he was dead and the man who had sent him to his doom was just a few feet away.

"Richmond," Corey said in a voice utterly strange because of his fury, "I'm going to give you a chance to draw, though I ought to shoot you down as you stand."

THE ramrod's mouth twisted in a leer. "Mr. Corey, I'll be plumb glad to accomodate you."

"Forget it," said Thorpe. "You don't know it, Pole, but Corey wants to quit us. He came here for a pay-off. I reckon five of us can give it to him—in lead."

Corey grinned, without humor. He was primed to kill. His masklike face, cold eyes told the Big T rider that.

"You can name the play, Guy," Corey said. "But remember I've got my sights lined on Richmond. If you or anybody else goes for a gun Richmond dies. After that I don't give a hoot!"

Thorpe set himself for action. Richmond's cry arrested him. "Hold it, Guy!" His long, gangling body was shaking. He said to Corey: "What's the alternative?"

"Everybody but you throws his guns to the floor," said Corey. "I'll holster mine and we'll both start from scratch."

"Do you take us for fools?" growled Thorpe. "You could shoot us all full of holes!"

"Wait, Guy!" Richmond interrupted. "I want a chance to fight back. I won't get it unless you and the others toss in your hardware."

For a second or two no one spoke. Every man stood rooted, waiting for some signal from Thorpe. The very walls seemed to be waiting for the crash of guns, the thump of bullets.

Thorpe, dry-lipped, was as tightly coiled as a steel spring. When he spoke it was in a whisper.

"You win, Pole. He's all yours." His hand moved toward his Colt.

"Wait!" ordered Corey. "I'll say when." His eyes slid toward Long. "You first, Ray. Lift your gun clear and toss it across the floor."

Long followed instructions, as did the other two Big T punchers. "You're next, Guy," Corey said to Thorpe.

The rancher took his gun out of the holster. His movements were slow and he watched Corey's left-hand Colt. Without warning Thorpe hurled himself to one side. Even as he crashed to the floor his gun was spewing flame.

Corey fired at almost the same instant. But his bullet cascaded into the far wall. He lined a shot at Pole Richmond just as Thorpe's bullet ripped into his side.

The blow knocked Corey off his feet, distorted his aim enough so that he missed Richmond. The lanky ramrod lunged behind the table, his long-barreled Colt spilling hot lead.

In that dread moment Corey saw his finish. Thorpe and Richmond had him in a wicked crossfire and in another second the remaining Big T punchers would join the fracas.

Corey tilted his right-hand gun around and smashed the coal-oil lamp with a shot. Darkness dropped like a heavy curtain upon the smoke-filled room. He rolled frantically to his left as Thorpe fired at the muzzle flare from Corey' gun.

The room shook to the roar of Colts. Corey had to get out of there before he was cut to ribbons. But at his first effort to rise his entire right side seemed to be on fire. There was a sticky warmth in the region of his belt buckle—blood. Pain was like a hammer driving steel splinters into his lacerated flesh.

He had only two avenues of escape. The front door, which now showed as a gray stain against the room's deep background of blackness, and the side window which was commanded by Thorpe. The agony beating through him and the sickness it brought with it warned Corey that the nearest way, through the doorway was the only way. But the moment he moved into that shaft of dim gray light from outside he'd be a clear target for Big T bullets.

Weariness crept inexorably along his muscles. But somehow he had to muster the energy to make a dash for the door. Thorpe and the others kept up a sporadic fire, shifting craftily after each shot.

"Pole," Thorpe yelled suddenly. "Watch the door!"

COREY was tempted to drill a shot toward the sound of Thorpe's voice, but changed his mind. Instead, he cocked his left-hand gun, gripped his right-hand weapon tightly in his fist and set himself to rise.

Crouched on one knee, Corey flung

his left-hand gun toward the window. The bullet under the hammer exploded in a crashing roar.

Immediately the Big T men concentrated their fire on the spot.

"Gun him down!" Thorpe shouted.

Corey pushed himself to his feet. A fierce jab of pain rocketed through him. Nausea welled in his stomach. He felt light-headed. But he literally threw himself through the open doorway. He was halfway across the porch when he heard Thorpe's strident yell.

"He's gone through the door!"

A volley of six-gun slugs tore through the doorway. But Corey, having stumbled at the head of the steps, was bouncing down them, each jolt wracking him with excruciating pain. And as he hit the dust of the yard on his back he heard boots pounding toward him from the room. And shouts from the bunkhouse announced the approach of the rest of Thorpe's gunslick crew . . . .

TOM FRAZER let go of the rowboat the instant the river spun the tiny craft over the lip of the falls. Then he was plummeting downward. A cold, mist-laden wind pelted his face. He blacked out for a second, but consciousness came roaring back when his hurtling body smashed through the boiling torrent of water at the base of the cataract.

He went down into cool green darkness that was shot through with a riot of bubbles. His shoulder jarred against a rock. The entire left side of his body went numb. He cracked an elbow against another boulder. Then he was fighting to rise to the surface against the pounding pressure of a wall of water cascading down from the lip of the falls.

He got clear, gasping for breath. But at once a current drew him into a vortex where he spun around at such a dizzy rate that the world became a gyrating bowl. The walls of the bowl were a mountain of white water. Above it was the drumming of the falls itself, steadily heaping its tons of water into the pool.

Frazer was whirled around the outer edges of the bowl. A half-dozen times he made the dizzy circuit before he was sent lurching down into the funnel. He gave himself up then. A green tide overwhelmed him, a ceaseless pressure that squeezed his lungs like a bellows. Then a capricious current caught him and flung him clear.

He broke through the surface of the pool with his lungs on fire. Feeling himself about to submerge again, he struck out desperately for the black rocks that formed a ragged, protecting wall around the pool. He was exhausted by the time his knee scraped against some stones and he staggered through the shallows. He slumped down and lay where he fell.

All the energy in him had been used up. He was as limp as a rag. He felt as if he'd never be able to take another step. He was a mass of aches. Other rocks at the bottom of the pool had punished his body but he hadn't noticed them because of the shocking blow he had taken in the shoulder.

Ten minutes went by before he was able to muster the strength to get up and clamber stiffly to the grassy bank. Once more he sank down to rest. His wet clothes felt clammy, his red hair hung in an unruly cowl over his still swollen face. Wearily he dragged off his boots, emptied the water out of them and struggled into them again.

He got up slowly, looking carefully across the pool to the brush over there. If the Big T riders had followed him along the rapids they might even now be quartering through the trees toward him. The danger forced him to retreat into the trees at his back. There he paused long enough to empty his gun and clean the bullet loads with leaves before replacing them in the Colt cylinder. It was a makeshift arrangement and he doubted if the weapon would be useful in an emergency, but it was the best he could do.

A look at the sun told him that darkness was not far off. He was about twenty miles from the Double Y Ranch and on foot he would be lucky if he reached the outfit by the next afternoon in his physical condition. Besides, he was in rough, hilly

country and the high-heeled boots he wore were not meant for walking.

HE REALIZED that by this time Richmond's riders would have appropriated his gelding. The only place he could get another mount was at the Double Y. That was bad, because he had hoped to reach the sheriff by nightfall to have him start action against Thorpe's Big T outfit. Now, even though Richmond's bunch most likely would think him dead, Thorpe might spook up enough to change the hiding place of the stolen cattle. The only sure way to catch Thorpe's men with the stolen beef was to lead a posse up into these hills—pronto.

Impatience drove Frazer to a fast gait through the timber. Yet he held the pace for only a short time. The going was too rough. There were too many steep pitches to climb and the ache in his shoulder had by no means subsided enough to allow him complete freedom of movement.

When night fell he made a dry camp under a low overhang at the base of a bluff almost completely shrouded by bushes. He decided to risk a fire in order to dry his clothes. The matches he carried were useless so he had to resort to the age-old wilderness method of igniting a tiny blaze by rubbing two sticks together. Once he had the fire going well he shed his clothes and hung them on a sapling to dry. When they were dry he put them on, stretched out on the ground close to his drying fire and drifted off to sleep.

He spent a thoroughly uncomfortable night. Though his body ached with weariness the chill forest air and his lack of a blanket rendered it impossible for him to sleep soundly. The ground was cold on his back and he was forced to rise at intervals to replenish the fire.

When morning came he felt worse than he did the night before. His limbs were cramped and stiff. Hunger, too, had added its pressing demands. He hadn't touched food since the previous noon and had expended plenty of physical energy. He was a big man and an active one. His powerful body required generous quantities of food to keep it going. But he had to face the grim fact that he wouldn't be eating again until sometime in the afternon when he reached the Double Y.

It wasn't a happy prospect as he moved off through the trees on a journey that threatened to tax all his remaining endurance.

CHAPTER XII

Hard to Kill

PAUSING only occasionally to rest his aching, protesting feet, Frazer walked all morning. The country became less rough in the lower foothills. But to Frazer, stumbling along, there was no alleviating the pain that each step brought.

He began to lose all trace of time. The brassy sun passed its zenith and started its downward wheel through the blue, cloud-packed sky. Dust lifted, smothering, around him as he traversed a dry arroyo. It formed a crust on his skin. There seemed to be no end to the undulating hills and ridges.

It was close to five o'clock in the afternoon when he sighted the Double Y. For the past two hours his progress had been agonizingly slow. The powerful body that had carried him through more than one rough-and-tumble fight was being relentlessly hammered down. Every nerve, every muscle in his whip-cord frame felt bruised and beaten.

He shuffled down the slope of the last ridge and through weary, bloodshot eyes surveyed the yard. It was empty. Cooper and White were probably still out on the range somewhere. But Margo . . . Well, he didn't expect any welcome. He didn't relish asking any favors, either. Yet he had no choice right now.

The sight of the well fifty yards from the house pulled Frazer that way. He was thirsty. He stumbled over to the well and

tugged at the chain attached to the bucket resting in the cool, shaded depths. The chain creaked as he laboriously hauled the bucket up. Taking down the big tin cup hanging from a nail he dipped it into the bucket.

He had gulped down his second cupful of water when he became aware of someone watching him. He turned to face the ranchhouse. Margo was there. Just that glimpse of her leaning against the railing, her fair head tipped toward him filled him with loneliness.

"If you've come for your bedroll," she said severely, "you'll find it on your bunk."

"All I want is a horse right now," he murmured.

He walked out into the sun, blinking in the fast-fading light. His step was uneven.

Margo stiffened. She looked over toward the corral. "Where's my gelding?"

"Up in the hills." His mouth twisted bitterly. "Sorry about that. You can have my sorrel in exchange. But now I'd like to take that sorrel for a little while."

Frazer had never been as hungry in his life, but he wouldn't tell Margo so. He could have fallen down right where he stood but pride carried him across the yard toward the corral.

Suddenly Margo cried out to him. He kept walking. The corral still seemed far away. But he had to get a rope around his sorrel.

Then Margo came up behind him. She caught him by the arm, pulled him around. He fell against her. Margo gasped, seeing his haggard, dust-streaked face.

"Tom!" she cried, holding him tight. "You're hurt!"

"Not hurt," he said. "Just tired from walking."

"Where did you lose your horse?"

"A mile above the falls."

Shock showed in Margo's eyes. "You didn't walk all the way from the falls?"

He nodded curtly and tried to pull away.

"Oh, my dear!" Margo said. "You look ready to drop. What happened? Tell me!"

Weary as he was, he wanted Margo in his arms, wanted her lips against his. But all he said was:

"You're forgetting I don't work for the Double Y any more."

Margo hadn't wanted to admit how bleak and lonely the hours had been since she had sent him away. Whether he still loved Ella or not, a little of him was better than nothing at all. For now at last she saw once and for all that Frazer was all in the world that mattered to her.

"Tom," she said with sudden tenderness, "I'm sorry. I'm glad you're back. I—I don't care about Ella or anything else. I want you here." Her arms slipped around him and she kissed him, minding neither the dust on his face nor the stubble of his beard.

SHE pulled away abruptly, realizing his fatigue.

"Tom, you're worn out! You've got to sit down. When did you eat last?"

"At noon yesterday," Frazer said slowly.

Margo exclaimed. "More than twenty-four hours! And you've walked more than twenty miles." She pulled him toward the house. "You must sit down and rest. I'll get you something to eat."

He walked dazedly beside her.

"What were you doing at the falls," she asked, "and how did you lose your horse? I want to know."

Frazer told her bluntly, "I found your stolen Herefords."

"Tom, you didn't!"

He nodded. "In a blind canyon above the falls. And I found some of Thorpe's bunch on the way to rebrand some of the beefs."

He slumped into a chair. A ragged sigh escaped from him. Waves of exhaustion broke over him in a warm tide.

"I'll hurry and get something to eat," Margo said hastily, "You need that before you say another word!"

When she returned from the kitchen in ten minutes she found him asleep in the chair, his chin on his chest, his long body sprawled out. She stared down at his

dusty, bedraggled figure, remorsefully wondering just what he had gone through up in the hills. She could guess that he had come close to death again. And as always the risks had been for her and the Double Y.

She took the food back to the kitchen and let Frazer sleep until Tex rode in from the range and came to the house to see if Margo had any special orders for him. The heavy thump of Tex's boots pulled Frazer out of the deep well of slumber.

He stirred dazedly. "Hello, Tex," he muttered thickly and got stiffly to his feet. A glance through the window showed him it was almost dark. "I've got to be going."

Margo came forward and took him by the arm. "Not before you sit down and eat and tell me about the Double Y cattle."

"Did you get a line on those rustled cows, Tom?" demanded Tex eagerly.

Frazer allowed himself to be led into the kitchen. Margo piled his plate high with hot food, then filled a big cup with steaming black coffee.

Frazer picked up a fork and for ten minutes he didn't speak. The food disappeared rapidly. He drained the coffee cup. Margo refilled it. Only then did he pause to tell of his adventures up around the falls.

"Tom, you take such desperate chances," Margo said. "It's a miracle you survived that spill into the falls pool."

"That must have been something!" murmured Tex.

"I'm not likely to forget it," agreed Frazer.

When he had emptied the second cup of coffee he pushed back his chair and stood up.

"I'm going to change clothes, then ride out," he said.

"But what can you do tonight?" Margo asked.

"I want to get a sheriff's posse to ride into the hills," Frazer told her. "Richmond and Thorpe probably figure I'm dead. But if I know Thorpe, he'll play it safe and move that herd to some other hiding place. If I can get a bunch to hit for the hills tonight we can be in position tomorrow to trap the Big T crowd when they try to shift the beefs."

"Anything I can do?" Tex asked.

"Yeah. You can take a pasear and try to round up some of the boys from Simmons' and Roush's ranches. When you get them ride on to town and meet me there. I'll route out Lovelock and Bassett and go on to Two Forks for Landon. You and your crowd ought to be able to make town in a little more than two hours. . . ."

BILL COREY scrambled frantically to his feet at the foot of the Big T porch steps. The crew was rushing toward the house, those inside soon would be piling out of it. He was in a tight.

With a curse Corey lifted his gun and fired two fast shots into the ranchhouse doorway. A yell of pain came back to him. There was a wild scramble as everybody fell back.

Corey stumbled to the end of the porch, to put the rest of the Big T crew on the far side of the ranchhouse from him. Pain slogged through him at every step.

He was breathing hard and fast when he reached his pony. He got one foot into the stirrup, tried to heave his body into the saddle. A sharp burst of agony in his wounded side drove him gasping to his knees. A Big T man appeared on the porch, pumping a shot toward him. Corey fired back. The Big T puncher dropped behind the railing.

Again Corey put a foot in the stirrup. He could hear the yells of the crew as they charged around the front of the house. Corey almost went blind with pain but he hauled himself into the saddle, kicked the pony into motion.

Bullets spattered over his head as he sped away. Every man in the crew was pumping hot lead in his direction, including Richmond and Thorpe.

"Don't let him get away!" Thorpe yelled.

But Corey was already out of six-gun range, galloping across the open plain.

Behind him Pole Richmond was shout-

ing: "Get your horses!"

Feverishly Corey reloaded his Colt. His hands were unsteady from the pounding gait of his horse and from the weakness that was creeping over him like paralysis. Finished, he thrust the weapon into his holster and gave his entire attention to his riding.

Dizziness made his head reel. The wound in his side felt as if a red-hot branding iron were riveted there. He found it difficult to breathe. His eyes seemed to be out of focus. The distant trees for which he was aiming were doing a crazy war-dance in front of him.

Muted thunder to the rear warned him that the Big T pursuit was under way. Still the timber belt seemed terribly far away. He grew fainter and hotter. Once he almost toppled, and only a last-minute grab for the horn saved him.

Looking back, he could see a bunch of riders strung out. They looked like a waving black rope under the star shine. When he swung around again blackness swam into his brain. He slumped forward. Instinctively his arms encircled his pony's neck. The coarse mane enveloped his face.

The pony trotted on, Corey's head bouncing up and down at each long stride, though the pony's gait had slackened. A scant mile to the rear Pole Richmond and his gunslicks hammered along at a powerful run. Yard by yard they gained on Corey.

Two hundred yards from the timber line Corey fought his way out of the fog of unconsciousness. He could feel the warm blood and knew that each lurch of his body in the saddle sent another fraction of his life spurting out of the throbbing hole below his ribs. Soon there would be no blood, and no life in him.

If he could reach the trees he might have a chance, only he couldn't stick in the saddle much longer. The dizziness was coming back. A trip-hammer was at work above his eyes, sending nails of pain through his head.

Suddenly the pony plunged into a narrow, twisting trail in the timber. The trail lifted in a long slope. Behind him, still on the prairie, Corey heard the racket of pursuit. The Big T wanted his scalp, and they meant to have it. There was blood lust in the grim, pursuing cry they sent crashing through the night.

A small break appeared in the thick brush. On an impulse Corey swung his gelding off the trail and into the opening. He forced his panting, struggling horse into the tangle of trees and brush. He had all he could do to hold on before he pulled the gelding to a halt deep in the trees.

The Big T riders were pounding up the slope now. Would they sense his change of direction, or go galloping along the main trail?

TENSELY he waited in the darkness. He hoped he could stay in the saddle till the Big T crowd raced by. If he fell now the crash would carry to them.

The sound of the gelding's labored breathing seemed terribly loud. Then a rolling thunder of hoofs swept up the grade. There was the creak of saddle leather, a rider's indistinguishable yell, then the Big T rushed past.

Corey listened to the racket diminish as the Big T crew hit the top of the grade and plunged swiftly down the far slope. When he could no longer hear any sounds he slid out of the saddle. The brush cushioned his fall. The jolt sent fresh agony through his side, but it also pushed back the waves of dizziness long enough for him to scramble out of the way of the gelding's hoofs.

Flat on his back he tore at his shirt, biting back the sob of pain that pushed into his throat. Blood seeped across his fingers. His shirt and undershirt were soaked with it. He found a dry portion of the shirt, however, and managed to rip it off. He wadded it into a thick compress and rammed it into the wound.

He ought to get to a creek to bathe and clean it but he didn't have the strength to move. He could only hope that he would be able to avoid infection.

The effort of twisting around to fit the compress against the wound took all the

starch out of him. The dizziness finally overwhelmed him and he lost consciousness . . . .

A gray dawn mist clung to the low brush when he opened his eyes. There was a thorough chill in the air. All of his muscles felt congealed. He was numb all over. When he moved his side throbbed with a dull ache. He felt hot and cold all over.

For a minute or two he lay, watching his pony cropping the leaves from a small bush. He lifted a hand to his head. A dry heat there told him he was running a fever. At the same time a chill sent its shuddering impulse through him.

A dismal sense of failure struck him. Not only had he failed to kill Pole Richmond, but he hadn't got his money from Thorpe, and now he had a wound that threatened to smash his entire plan to run away with Ella.

Gritting his teeth in pain, Corey slowly got his knees under him, then got up. He staggered to his horse, wondering bleakly how he was going to heave himself into the saddle.

Cold sweat seeped out of his forehead while he leaned weakly against the gelding's flanks. Then he spotted a flat rock nearby. He led the horse over to it. Stepping on the rock, he lifted himself into the saddle, sent the gelding crashing through the brush, and back down to the trail.

CHAPTER XIII

Ella's Ruse

ONCE on the trail Corey took a roundabout course until he reached a grassy basin through which flowed a small mountain branch.

Dismounting, he hobbled over to the creek. Flat on his stomach he bent his face into the water and took a long drink. He sat up, loosened his belt, drew up his shirt, and had a good look at his wound. The slug had passed right through his side. The wound was not deep, but the lips of it were raw and red and inflamed. Bathing it in cold creek water would not help.

What he needed was a doctor. But the nearest doctor was in Two Forks and he couldn't risk going there. Thorpe would have men scattered in the hills and in town on the watch for him. He was in no condition to buck them in another gun ruckus. With luck he might get the wound attended to in Dunbar tonight before he and Ella boarded the westbound train.

Meanwhile, there was still the problem of laying his hands on some money. The three silver dollars in his pocket were the full extent of his resources.

He was reasonably certain that all of the Big T crowd would spend the day away from the ranch, looking for him. They would never anticipate his coming back. If they all cleared out he could take the money he and Ella would need for a stake from Thorpe's safe. He could help himself to food, too. He hadn't eaten for more than twelve hours and in his weakened condition he needed food.

Packing the cloth compress against the wound again, Corey stuffed his shirt back into his trousers, tightened his belt and rose to his feet. He had to lead the gelding over to another flat-topped rock in order to heave his body into the saddle.

Then he rode back at a fast trot headed for Thorpe's ranch.

Half an hour later he sat his horse atop a wooded knoll that overlooked the Big T ranch yard. He saw a bunch of horses in the corral and a few of Thorpe's riders were dawdling around in front of the bunkhouse.

When none of the men showed signs of riding off he got out of the saddle, picketed the gelding, and sprawled in the grass to continue his vigil.

Near noon three punchers galloped into the yard and rode over to the house. Pole Richmond and Guy Thorpe came out and took the riders back inside with them.

With the three men already lounging in the yard and Thorpe and Richmond in the house, eight of the Big T crew were accounted for. Corey was surprised that the whole crew wasn't out waiting to finish him off.

About one o'clock the three men who had ridden in saddled up fresh horses and went off again. Still the other men lingered. Corey's impatience grew. His wound continued to bother him. He felt dizzy and light-headed and wondered if his fever was rising. He couldn't go much longer without eating, either. But he certainly was in no shape to buck all those men in the yard.

A little after three in the afternoon Thorpe went to the corral and roped out a horse. Richmond entered the bunkhouse. Then the three men there joined Thorpe at the corral and threw their blankets and rigs on horses.

Richmond leaned against the bunkhouse door as Thorpe led his three men out of the yard.

Corey watched with a hard grin on his mouth. Just one man left. And he was Pole Richmond, the man he had missed killing the night before!

COREY led his horse down the slope through the trees until he was just a few hundred yards from the back wall of the bunkhouse. Then he lifted his gun out of holster and went forward through the brush. There were two windows in the rear and Corey approached at a low crouch.

He gained the wall without being spotted. Then, flattened against the building, he started his careful circuit of the bunkhouse. As he reached each window he ducked down and crawled past. Once past the rear wall he renegotiated the blind side of the building and eased around to the entrance.

By that time his wounded side was punishing him with twinges of pain. He shook his head to clear it of dizziness, then lunged into the open doorway of the bunkhouse.

Richmond had just swung away from a clothing peg. His right hand dropped toward his gun. But he stopped without any command from Corey when he saw the cocked Colt in Corey's fist.

"I came back to finish my job," Corey said flatly.

The pupils of Richmond's eyes dilated. There was a trapped look about him.

"Shoot and be hanged, Corey," he said.

Corey swept his left hand briefly across his eyes. A black mist gathered before him. Richmond's face appeared a little dim and remote. Fear took hold of him. He had to get this over with before he blacked out.

"Richmond," he said grimly, "you're a low-down skunk but I'm going to give you a fair shake. When I ram my gun back into leather start your draw."

Richmond's eyes glinted. "You fool, if I had the drop on *you* I wouldn't waste any time."

"That's what makes you a polecat," snapped Corey.

At the instant the barrel of his gun raked the top of his holster Richmond swept off his hat and sent it skimming toward Corey. The brim slapped across Corey's cheek as he brought his Colt back into line and fired.

His shot came a breath before Richmond's, for the Big T ramrod had made an amazingly fast draw. But Corey's slug hit him, he reeled and went down with a broad red splash of blood seeping across his face.

The job was done. Suddenly Corey found no pleasure in it. The dizziness whirled back in front of his eyes and he had to hold on to himself to keep from falling.

As he hurried to the main house, every step set the trip-hammer beating his head and side. But he had to have money. Besides, if he was caught here he would wind up in Boot Hill.

Corey stumbled up the porch steps, charged into the front room and headed for the iron safe. He wasted five minutes at the dial but had no success, so with a curse he drew his gun, took careful aim at the lock and let go with a shot. The

bullet only dented the hard metal. Twice more he fired at the lock. But it held firm.

He wheeled away from the safe, hurried to the window. A glance out across the flats showed no sign of horsemen, so he turned back to the closed roll-top. He rolled the top back and faced a row of cluttered pigeonholes. Hurriedly he groped through the assortment, tossing the papers on the floor. At last, under some old tally books, he found a battered wallet containing five hundred dollars.

He shoved the money into his pocket. It would have to do. There was no time to hunt for more. The afternoon was waning and he had a long ride ahead of him to meet Ella at the abandoned line shack . . . .

FROM the moment Ella got up that morning she was nervous. The day seemed to stretch endlessly before her. How would she be able to endure it until time to meet Corey?

She was thankful that Winston wasn't home. He had ridden into Two Forks the night before on business, saying he would stay overnight in the hotel. She hoped on his return that he would join the crew on the range without stopping at the ranchhouse.

But even as that hope entered her mind, Van Winston rode into the yard. From the wide window in the front room his wife saw him dismount and come stamping up the veranda steps.

"Hello, Van," she said, as he came in.

"Did you miss me?" he asked with the taunting rasp in his voice that had become habitual. It was as if he took a sadistic delight in letting her know he meant to make her live up to the letter of her bargain.

Ella let herself be drawn into his arms, accepted his rough kiss. She had become accustomed to his way of snatching at what he wanted, taking by force and by the sheer drive of his will. When he released her he looked her over as if she were a prime steer he was appraising.

"Ella, you're worth coming home to," he said. He gave her a sly, amused glance. But swiftly the amusement washed out of his eyes. In its place slid something dark and ugly.

"Where did you go after I left yesterday afternoon?" he demanded.

A quick tremor shook her. She said tightly, "Just for a ride."

"Meet anybody you know?"

"No."

"That's a lie!" Winston's hands fastened like steel bands around her arms. "You went to see Tom Frazer!"

"That's not true!" Ella protested.

"Don't tell me!"

For a moment she feared she had been seen with Corey at the line shack. But mentioning Tom showed that Winston was just harping on the old line.

"Let me go!" she pleaded. "You're hurting me."

Winston's eyes flashed. "This is nothing compared to what will happen if you don't stay away from Frazer."

Suddenly Ella could stand no more. She wrenched half out of Winston's grasp, dealt him a stinging blow on his cheek with the flat of her hand. With a bull roar he slapped her face first on one side, then on the other. She fell backwards into a chair, cowering away from him. On her burning cheek the imprint of Winston's fingers lay like ruddy welts.

"Get this, Ella!" he said, towering over her. "I'm running this ranch and I'm running you. You'll take orders like anybody in my crew. Hereafter when you go riding one of the hands will ride with you."

Ella felt bruised and beaten. That threat could ruin everything!

Hoof beats drummed loudly in the yard. Boots thumped across the veranda. Jess Engel, the Circle W foreman, walked in.

"I've got the crew working the south range, Van," he said. "Do you still want to take a look at the grass up in that northeast section?"

"Yeah. But you stay here."

"Here?" Engel asked, frowning in surprise.

Winston jerked his head at Ella. "Now that I've got a wife, Jess," he said oddly, "I don't like to leave her alone."

ENGEL grinned. Ella turned her face away.

"I'll be glad to keep an eye on her, Van," the foreman told him.

"Good," said Winston. "And if Ella feels like going riding this afternoon you tag along. The range isn't too safe."

Engel nodded soberly. "I reckon you're right, Van."

Ella met her husband's stare with a bright, hard anger that brought a low laugh from him. She loathed the sight of him, of his eyes, so posessive and arrogant as they traveled over her, making her flesh crawl.

He moved over to her and deliberately kissed her again, then both men left the house.

Ella didn't move until she heard Winston ride away from the ranch at a fast gallop. Then she rose stiffly and walked down the hall to the kitchen. She glanced out into the back yard. Engel was perched atop the corral fence, whittling at a stick with a sharp-bladed knife. The foreman had taken up his position as sentry.

Wearily Ella went upstairs to the bedroom she shared with Winston. From a closet she brought out a small valise, packed it with all her belongings it would hold, flipped the catches and left the valise on the bed.

She was prepared to run, if only she could get safely away.

At noon she ate lightly. Nervousness had taken away her appetite. The early afternoon dragged on. Engel still maintained his vigil—by the bunkhouse now.

Ella grew frantic. If there were only some way she could lure the foreman from his post! Then, suddenly, as she went to a storage closet to put away a tin of coffee, an idea leaped into her mind as to how she might be able to immobilize the ramrod for a brief period.

Hurrying to the back door, she called, "Jess, can you come here for a moment?"

Engel rose from the bench and said, "Sure."

He put down the old saddle he had been mending and sauntered to the back door. His dark-skinned, dour face surveyed Ella boldly when he stepped past her into the kitchen.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Ella disliked the man intensely. He was another Winston—arrogant and ruthless and careless of the feelings of others. But now she gave him a friendly smile. She gestured to the dark, windowless pantry.

"There's a big bag of flour on one of the lower shelves in there," she said. "Would you mind getting it for me?"

Engel stared at her in surprise. "You figuring on doing some baking?" He grinned. "That's supposed to be Mrs. Loring's job. She's the cook and housekeeper. Always has been."

"Oh, I know that," Ella said lightly. "But Van gave her a few days off to visit some relatives over in Dunbar, and I'd like to show what I can do. So, if you don't mind, I'd like that flour."

Ella felt the blood rush to her face and throat under Engel's sharp scrutiny. All of her muscles seemed to be freezing up with the sudden tension that assailed her. She moistened her dry lips.

The Circle W ramrod shrugged. "All right, Ella," he said with blunt familiarity. "Some biscuits would go good for supper."

Ella fell back a step to let Engel walk in front of her. When he entered the gloomy pantry she was right at his heels.

"There it is," she said. "Toward the back."

He blundered into the storage room, slamming one big hip against a shelf. Ella swung the door shut and twisted the key in the lock.

"Cuss it, Ella, what are you doing?" Engel yelled, his voice muffled as it seeped through the wooden panel of the door.

"That's plain enough, isn't it?" she retorted. "I'm locking you in for a while. Just take it easy and think how nice it is to be sentry over a helpless woman."

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CHAPTER XIV

Swift Retribution

NOW that the ruse had worked, Ella, her heart pumping rapidly, hurried upstairs for the packed valise. The ramrod was banging thunderously on the storeroom door.

"Ella!" he shouted. "Let me out of here!"

She didn't answer as she went past the pantry. He threw himself against the door, rattling the hinges and shaking the entire room. Ella swiftly realized that the door would not withstand much of a battering.

She dashed out into the yard, raced into the barn for a rope, to catch her favorite mare. From the house she heard a booming that told of Engel's determined efforts to escape. She should have had the foreman saddle the mare for her on the pretext of going for a ride. Now she had to waste precious minutes roping the horse and getting the rig in place. But she had the saddle cinched and was leading the mare through the open gate when a splintering crash of wood warned her that Engel had broken down the storeroom door.

Valise in one hand, she climbed to the saddle and whirled the mare back into the corral. A shrill cry spilled from her throat as she raced the mare at the other animals in the enclosure. She caught one gelding on the rump with the snapping end of her reins. The gelding bolted, crashed into others, and the next minute all of the horses in the corral were headed toward the open gate in a wild stampede, with Ella yelling them on at the top of her voice.

As the horses sped across the ranch yard Jess Engel reeled through the back door.

"Come back here!" he roared at Ella Winston.

"Not today, Jess!" she called. "Tell Van so long for me."

Engel made a lunge for one of the geldings bolting past him. He missed and went down in the dust. The horses raced past and he got up, shouting at Ella to stop.

The girl paid no heed. She heard the flat crack of a gun. Twisting in the saddle, she saw smoke dribbling from the barrel of the ramrod's .45. The shot was a warning. Engel was accurate with a Colt. He wouldn't dare shoot her. But he wouldn't hesitate to bring down the mare.

Frantically, Ella ripped out her own .38. Her hand shook, but she snapped a shot at Engel and was amazed to see his Colt drop. He fell, writhing in the dust.

The sight sickened Ella. Her blood turned to ice at the thought that Engel might be dying. But she couldn't stop now. The mare galloped on, carrying her farther out of range.

As she raced toward the hills the still, hot afternoon throbbed with a silent threat of disaster. There seemed to be a heavy pressure all around, inside her, too. Her spirits flagged. She was leaving her husband for another man. And Winston, vengeful devil that he was, would scour the earth looking for her and Corey. Every day they lived it would be on borrowed time.

Every mile she traveled now the fear of pursuit rode with her. She dreaded meeting anyone, and only once did she sight a small party of horsemen. She detoured through a brush to avoid them.

Though she pushed the mare at a rapid pace she did not reach the line shack until a scant half hour before dusk. In the cool half-light Corey stepped out of the trees, leading his horse.

"I thought you weren't coming," he said.

"I had some trouble," Ella told him as she got down, letting the valise slide to the ground.

"Were you followed?" he demanded.

"I don't think so."

"You've got to be sure."

"I'm as sure as I can be." Ella saw the

haggard, strained look on Corey's face, then the dark, telltale stain on his shirt. "Bill, you've been shot!"

"Just a flesh wound," he said. "It'll be all right."

"But you look feverish! Let me see the wound. Maybe I can fix it up."

"No. There's no time. I'll let the sawbones in Dunbar fix it up."

ELLA'S mouth tightened. Corey was running a high fever. That meant an infection.

"Bill," she said, "maybe you oughtn't wait too long. If there's an infection—"

Corey shook his head. "I'll have to take my chances. Maybe some dirt got into the wound, but it's not too bad."

"How did it happen, Bill?"

"I had a run-in with Thorpe's bunch when I went up there to get some money."

Quickly then he told her about having had to go back to help himself, and for another shot at Pole Richmond.

"He had a killing coming to him for beating up Tom and sending him to his death."

A shiver ran through Ella. "Tom, dead?" Like Corey, she couldn't conceive of Tom Frazer being dead.

Corey's eyes brimmed over with bitterness. He blamed himself for the fate that had overtaken Tom. If he, Bill, hadn't run with Thorpe's wild bunch Tom might be alive. Only Bill Corey hadn't had nerve enough to live like a man.

"I reckon Tom is gone, all right," he told Ella. "He spotted some rustled Double Y cows up in the hills and some of Thorpe's bunch chased him to the river. He got away in an old rowboat but was swept over the falls."

"Poor Tom!" Ella choked. "If he'd only had some help!"

"I know," said Corey grimly. "I could have helped him—but I didn't."

Ella looked at him intently. "How do you know so much about what happened? Have you been running with Thorpe's bunch?"

He smiled thinly. "Would it make any difference?"

Ella loved him as much as she could love any man. She guessed he rustled, which was why he'd gone to Thorpe for money. But in this desperate hour she didn't care.

"No, Bill," she said shakily. "It doesn't make any difference. We're two of a kind, I guess. We're both taking what doesn't belong to us. You killed Richmond to get away. And I—I killed Jess Engel!"

Corey stared in stupefaction. "You killed Jess?"

She gripped his shirtfront with trembling hands as she poured out the story of what had happened at the Circle W, culminating in her firing at the foreman in an attempt to get away.

"I couldn't help myself," she quavered. A sob caught in her throat. Tears stung her eyes. "When I—I looked back at him he wasn't moving."

"Good Lord!" breathed Corey, holding her. "We've sure played the devil. I don't wonder you're upset."

Ella shook as she clung to him. "Oh, Bill, everything's going wrong!"

Corey's eyelids felt weighted and heavy with fever. But out of some stubborn reserve of strength he drew a stern reply.

"Don't talk that way, hon. We've burned our bridges. It's too late for regrets. We've got to run." He stared up at the sky, fast turning pink in the west. "When Winston finds you gone he'll fill every trail with riders looking for you."

"He'll try the Double Y first," Ella said.

"And after that, if he's as smart as I think he is, he'll nead for Dunbar. I'm wondering how long it will take him to figure the play correctly."

He walked unsteadily to his horse, tried to heave himself into the saddle but fell back. To keep from slipping to the ground he grabbed the pommel.

Ella rushed to him. "Bill! You can't ride."

"I've got to," he said grimly. "Just give me a hand up."

Ella kept staring back down the trail. Any moment she expected the woods to disgorge Circle W riders as she helped Corey to mount. But when he hit the sad-

dle blackness swam sluggishly before his eyes and he had to clutch at the horn to keep his balance.

"Are you sure you can make it?" she asked gravely.

Angry at his own weakness, Corey snapped at her: "Leave me alone and get on your horse."

Giving him a reproachful look, she mounted. They made a quick run from the clearing.

COREY set a hard pace. It took its toll of him though he tried to hide his suffering. More than once he gripped the saddle-horn as dizziness swirled over him. At times he lost all concept of his surroundings. The long minutes stretched out into black infinity and it seemed that he and Ella had been riding forever.

Darkness overtook them when they were still three miles from Corey's spread. Corey's horse, given its head, had brought him straignt home. Ella anxiously watched Corey. He was traveling on sheer nerve. How long could he last?

Suddenly they drifted into the ranch yard. The gelding halted near the back door. Ella slid down from her mare and hurried to Corey. He eased from the saddle, half-fell against her, with a great sigh. A warm wetness down his side told him that the wound was bleeding again.

"Bill," Ella begged, "get inside and lie down. You need a doctor."

He whirled on her angrily. "No! We can't risk that." He moved along to the back door. "We'll take the buckboard. It'll be slower but I—I can't stand that saddle any more."

Ella helped Corey inside the littered back room that served as a kitchen. She lit a lamp. Corey sagged into a chair.

"There's a bottle of whisky on the shelf," he said.

Ella found the bottle., and he took a deep draught. When he set it down on the table, heat was spreading through him. His head cleared. He got up, and picked up his few belongings wrapped in a tight bedroll.

"I'll need your help hitching the grays to the buckboard," he told Ella.

Night swallowed them once they struck the wagon road. Wind came out of the west, gently scented with sage. Stars wheeled in frosty brilliance through the sky's black vault. Trees whipped by in a dark, formless blur.

They crossed a shallow creek, the iron-tired wheels striking sharp echoes from the rocks of the ford. Then the road pitched upward toward a wide bench where on their right loomed a high, shaly bluff. To the left a shoulder of loose earth dropped in a steep slope to a culvert, the place on the Dunbar road that Tom Frazer always paused to contemplate.

Suddenly over the racket of the grays' pounding hoofs they heard a muted thunder.

"What's that?" Ella demanded.

There was an abrupt smell of dust in the air. A loose rock bounded across the road. Another glanced off the side of the buckboard. The rumble was seemingly above them.

Corey's face turned chalky.

"A slide!" he yelled. "We'll have to make a run for it!"

He laid the stinging tip of the whip on the grays. The vehicle lurched as the team leaned into the traces. A booming roar filled the night. Dust rose in a cloud around them. Rocks cascaded down the slope. Then in a great rush an avalanche of dust and stones hurtled down the slope and swept over the buckboard.

Ella screamed once. That shrill cry was silenced in the wild racket. The slide, a terrible Frankenstein, swooped down with a great rending and tearing, then utter stillness. . . .

TOM FRAZER rode swiftly under the bland night sky as the Double Y lights dropped out of sight. Although his need for more sleep was a demand he could not long deny, he felt reasonably capable of seeing the night through.

The meal Margo had given him, and the few drinks of brandy he had consumed had been a marvelous pick-up. He had also taken the time for a quick dip in the

creek pool behind the house. He had changed into fresh clothes, taken a spare six-gun out of his bedroll and thrown his riding gear on the back of a rangy, long-gaited sorrel.

The horse liked to run and he gave it full rein. There was a lot to be done this night before the posse he hoped to recruit could get back into the hills. He was a little worried. If Thorpe had any doubt at all that he had not been killed in the plunge over the falls he would have wasted no time in shifting the stolen beefs. The posse would have its work cut out, hunting the critters and catching the Big T crew with them. However, the cattle were there and he didn't beleive Thorpe would move them over the state line without first rebranding them and waiting for the scars to heal.

After a fast ten-minute run Frazer pulled the sorrel in to a ground-eating canter. He didn't want to run the risk of the animal foundering on him in the hills.

Five miles from the Double Y the trail he was following cut into the main road to Dunbar. Since Harry Bassett's Pothook outfit was only a few miles away, Frazer decided to take the road.

He was negotiating the twisting grade beyond when a dull, booming thunder was telegraphed to him by the brisk wind. He glanced toward the sky, looking for the massed clouds in the west that would herald the approach of a storm. But the heavens were clear and star-dappled.

The sound came to him again, in a long, echoing reverberation. Suddenly he placed the racket as coming from a point two miles ahead where the wagon road skirted a shaly bluff.

He drew to a halt. The sound swelled to a great roar, then gradually dwindled away. Silence once more clamped a lid on the night. But another slide of rock and earth had come cascading down the cliff and across the road. Likely the road was blocked and he would have to ride through the thick brush to reach the Pothook ranch.

Yet some faint premonition of disaster he could not have explained impelled him to ride on to investigate the landslide. He rode up the hill. Once on top of the bench the sorrel stretched its legs and went streaking across country.

CHAPTER XV

Accused

WITHIN a mile Frazer detected the odor of freshly disturbed dust. Off ahead through the trees the low night sky was fogged with a slowly rising pall of gray dust. The scent of that dust grew heavier and more pronounced with every stride the sorrel took.

Galloping around a point of rock, Frazer came suddenly upon a great mound of dirt and rubble that barricaded the road. And half-buried in that loose shale and rock were the shattered, broken remains of a buckboard. Beyond the wagon he saw the head of a dead horse. Its mate, caught in a tangle of harness and trapped by debris was struggling to free itself, whinnying in terror.

Frazer leaped from the sorrel and ran to the great hill of earth that covered the road. His boots slipped and slid in the loose shale, but he clambered toward the horses. Then, near the edge of a culvert he saw a huddled shape. He pivoted in that direction—to Ella Winston! Except for her head and shoulders she was covered with rubble.

"Ella—Ella!" he cried, and leaned closer.

Fearfully he placed a hand over her heart; and was amazed when he felt it pumping slowly, feebly.

A sigh of relief escaped from him. He fumbled for matches and scratched one against a stone. In the guttering yellow light cupped in his palms he saw a cruel red gash over Ella's ear. Blood streaked her hair and stained her face. Her skin was a sickly white.

As the match flickered out, Frazer began clearing the rubble away from Ella's body with his bare hands. He freed her legs, looking for broken bones, but found none. But she might be suffering from internal injuries.

He picked her up gently and carried her to the side of the road. He had to get her to a doctor but he couldn't risk taking her on his saddle. The nearest place he could get a wagon was the Pothook.

Moving along the edge of the road he almost stumbled over a torn-open valise, filled with feminine garments and that valise and Ella's presence on the Dunbar road at this hour of the night told him that she had been running away.

Suddenly he was sure that Corey was here, too, somewhere in the wreckage. Ella wasn't the type to pull up stakes and go it alone.

Though Frazer knew Ella needed immediate attention, he couldn't go off without searching for Corey. He didn't have much hope; still he had to look. He moved across the loose earth, pawing through the shale and dirt. Pieces of the smashed buckboard stuck up out of the debris like the shattered spars of a derelict ship. He tugged them free. He used one to root through the dirt, in a cold sweat as he waited for the shock of the wood striking the body of his friend.

He spent fifteen minutes in that frantic search and found nothing. If Corey was here he was buried deep beneath the slide.

The certainty of Corey's doom settled like a cold stone in Frazer's stomach. Wild and weak and mercurial as Corey had been, there had been a firm attachment between the two men that nothing could sever. It didn't matter that Corey had done the one thing that would forever ostracize him in the West. To take another man's wife was to ask for quick and violent retribution. Corey had taken the step that put him beyond the pale—and now he was dead.

It was better than a bullet or a hangnoose, Frazer told himself. Yet Corey's loss would leave a vast empty place in Frazer that nothing could fill—neither time nor the love of a woman.

He had abandoned the search and was scrambling back to the injured woman when he heard the racket of a fast-traveling bunch of horsemen. As they appeared the moon shot up out of a bank of clouds. The grim havoc wrought by the landslide was brought into bold relief.

THE two men in the lead saw the rubble that blocked the road and sent their mounts skidding to a halt.

"Who's that?" Van Winston's peremptory voice queried. "Sing out!"

Behind him a dozen cowhands drew to a halt with a creak of saddle leather and the jangle of bit chains.

"All right, Van! It's Frazer."

Winston motioned toward the buckboard. "Yours, Frazer?"

Frazer shook his head as Winston pushed his mount forward.

"No," he said flatly, "but your wife is here. She's pretty badly hurt."

"You skunk!" Winston exploded. "I knew it!" His hand snaked to his gun. "This is the end of the line for you!"

Before Frazer could go for his own Colt, all down the line he saw silvery moonlight glinting on the barrels of six-guns. Any overt move now would be suicidal.

"Adams," said Winston to the rider beside him, "get Frazer's gun! We'll cover you."

The puncher dismounted and moved warily up to Frazer. He jerked Frazer's Colt from his holster, and tossed it to Winston. The rancher shoved the weapon into the waistband of his trousers.

"Three or four of you, get down and come with me," he said to the crew behind him.

The nearest punchers complied. The rest spread out across the road, tense and alert.

Winston strode heavily up to Frazer. "You had your warning to stay away from my wife, curse you!" he said, and swung at Frazer. The blow knocked the ramrod off his feet.

By the time Frazer rose, Winston was

kneeling beside the motionless figure of his wife. The Circle W punchers formed a ring around Frazer. He plainly saw that he had to take whatever was dished out to him.

"It's not like you think, Van," he said at Winston's back.

Winston straightened. His shoulders twitched beneath his black coat. His big hands knotted into fists.

"You talked Ella into running away, and this is the result."

"No, Van."

"Shut up!" grated Winston. "There's all the proof I need." He pointed to the smashed suitcase. "Today I left Jess Engel back at the ranch to keep an eye on her. She made a run for it late this afternoon. When Engel tried to stop her she put a bullet through his shoulder. She was on her way to meet you!"

Frazer stood immobile. But as he watched Winston's riders he was conscious of their hostility, that all of them had him pegged for one of the lowest crimes known to the West. None of them would hesitate to put a bullet in him.

"You've got to listen to me!" Frazer said to Winston. "I was riding over to the Pothook—"

"Yeah," Winston cut in, "and you heard the roar of the slide so you put your horse to a gallop. When you got here you found Ella lying unconscious." There was scorn in Winston's tone and in his eyes an outraged glitter.

"That's the way it was," Frazer said levelly. "She was half-buried in dirt and rocks. I had to dig her out."

Even as he spoke Frazer saw the cold disbelief in Winston's face. But still he could not bring himself to name Bill Corey. Better let Ella tell the truth when she regained consciousness.

But looking at her, he feared that she might even now be dying. If so, she would carry the true story of this night's events with her.

Suddenly Winston's harsh voice lifted. "Adams, take a run over to the Pothook and get a buckboard. We've got to get Ella into town to Doc Marlow."

The puncher ran back to his horse, mounted quickly.

"Take the old cut-off on your way back," Winston said crisply. "It meets the Twin Forks road about three miles from here. Strike back in this direction through the arroyo."

Adams rode carefully around the slide, and struck off at a fast clip down the road.

WINSTON went back to his wife. He knelt beside her, loosened her collar and bathed her face with water one of the punchers brought from a nearby stream. But none of his ministrations brought her back to consciousness. Finally, with a violent oath he lurched to his feet and stalked over to Frazer.

"God help you, Frazer, if Ella dies!" he grated.

"I want her well as much as you do," Frazer told him defiantly.

Winston's eyes were burning. "You won't be here to see her live or die," he said.

"There are plenty of trees here, Boss," one of the Circle W crew insinuated.

"Here's my lass rope, Van!" yelled another, as the men on horseback crowded forward.

These men were in a killing mood, seeing the still form of the girl lying in the road. One word from Winston would set them off like the fuse on a stick of dynamite. Frazer felt his blood run cold. He was not afraid of dying. Give him a gun or a rifle or even a knife and he'd take his chances in any crowd. But a rope around the neck with no opportunity to fight back was another matter.

"We'll take care of that in town," said Winston. "I want him to hang where everyone can see him."

"What about the sheriff?" asked a Circle W puncher.

"I'll handle him." Winston gestured. "Take some piggin' string and tie Frazer's hands behind his back."

Winston himself held a gun on Frazer while his wrists were firmly bound together behind his back.

An hour later the grim Circle W cavalcade rolled into Two Forks. Winston had sent a couple of riders ahead to alert the doctor. But Frazer, seeing a huddle of men in the middle of the dusty street, knew that the Circle W punchers had also spread the news of his capture and proposed hanging.

"Stand aside!" Winston ordered stridently as the curious mob surged forward.

The mob retreated grudgingly. The buckboard pulled up in front of Doc Marlow's home.

The gray-haired doctor stood in the doorway.

"Bring her right in, Van," he said.

As Winston climbed down from his horse, two hill ranchers named Barton and Kerlan, friends of Frazer, pushed along the walk toward the Circle W owner and shouted:

"What kind of a rigged-up deal are you pulling here, Winston?"

Tension held the crowd. Circle W punchers, guns out, closed in to form a protective circle about Frazer.

"There's nothing rigged-up about this," snapped Winston. "We caught Frazer trying to run off with my wife. They were caught in a landslide. Ella's bad hurt."

"Maybe she wanted to run," said Barton.

Winston bridled. "You looking for trouble, Barton?"

Barton, a lean-bodied man with sharp blue eyes and a slow, deliberate manner, stood his ground. "Not any. But Tom Frazer is a friend of mine. I don't figure him for a trick like that."

"Well, you figure wrong!" growled Winston. "Ella's dying and just as soon as Doc Marlow has a look at her I aim to see Frazer hung!"

"Do your talking later, Van!" said the doctor irritably. "Let's get your wife inside so I can see what can be done for her."

With Winston and the puncher, Adams, assisting him, he picked up the woman's limp form and gently carried her inside his office.

A few of the curious followed.

FRAZER sat his horse in the midst of the Circle W crew. Sweat stood out on his forehead from his surreptitious efforts to loosen the thin rope that held his wrists together. He had been tugging and wrenching at them all during the long ride to town. The flesh around his wrists was raw and inflamed, and pained him. He had managed to spread his hands apart just a trifle, but it was not enough to free them. And now he didn't have much time left.

He glanced at Barton and said, "Better stay out of it, Clem."

"What's a friend for?" demanded Barton. "You wasn't running off with Ella, was you?"

"No, Clem. I was on the way to the Pothook when I heard the roar of the slide. When I got around that point of rock on the Dunbar road I found a smashed buckboard and Ella almost buried in rubble."

"Was she alone?" Barton asked.

"Didn't see anyone else around, Clem," said Frazer.

"Well, this outfit ain't putting any rope around your neck if I can help it," Barton told him grimly. "I'll go find the sheriff."

"Landon's out of town," said a rider.

Winston and the others who had piled into the doctor's office came shuffling out.

"What did the doc say?" one of the Circle W punchers sang out.

"He can't tell yet," Winston said. "He'll know in a little while." He shouldered through the throng, many of them range drifters who had no particular sympathies, but the prospect of some excitement was enough to hold them here. "All right," the rancher said. "Let's get on with the hanging!"

"Not so fast!" yelled Barton. He had a gun in his hand and Kerlan, stepped a few paces to one side, also had drawn a Colt. "You're not hanging anybody tonight! This looks like a frame-up on Frazer to me. There must be enough of Tom's friends in this crowd to put a stop to this cussed nonsense." He whirled on the crowd. "Are you men going to let

Winston's bunch run their own law on Frazer?"

"I reckon they are," said a new, threatening voice from the alley behind Barton. "Drop that gun, Barton—fast!"

CHAPTER XVI

"End of the Line"

BARTON made a half-turn, his face congealed in fury and surprise. Guy Thorpe sat in the shadows on a black horse. His gun was lined on Barton's back. He moved forward. Behind him trooped Pole Richmond, a bloody bandage around his head, and all the rest of the Big T crew.

Barton had no choice. He dropped his Colt with a curse. So did Kerlan, while the Big T riders pushed their way through the throng, taking up carefully selected positions.

As Frazer saw this sudden turn of affairs he felt all hope in him die. With the sheriff out of town and the only two of his own friends present held under guns, he didn't have a chance. He saw a few familiar faces. But they were the faces of storekeepers or other men who couldn't be expected to take any physical risks.

No, any hope of rescue depended on Tex White and how quickly he could round up the Roush and Simmons crowd and bring them on to town. Even an open accusation of Guy Thorpe as a cow thief wouldn't bother this indifferent mob. Thorpe, to protect his own hide, was playing Winston's game. And here was another chance for Thorpe's bunch to get Tom Frazer.

"Me and the boys heard enough," Thorpe was drawling, "to figure that there's only one play for Winston to make. You know what you'd do with anybody caught stealing one of your cows or a horse! Well, a man that tries to put his hands on another man's wife is even worse than a rustler!"

Frazer debated telling the crowd that Thorpe was a rustler. But with only his word to back up the story it would mean nothing to any of the men except Barton and Kerlan—and their fangs had already been pulled. No, he needed Tex White and Roush and Simmons and others like them around—men whose standing in the town meant something—when he told his story. Then there would be action.

Desperately he wrenched at his bonds. The sharp cord dug into the bruised flesh of his wrists. It cut deeply, drawing blood. He gritted his teeth against the severe pain. If he could get free now he would make a run for it through the crowd. Even surrounded by the hostile Circle W crew and Thorpe's men on the outer flanks, they'd have a hard time hitting him once he piled off his horse and darted into the close-pressing throng.

Then the sound of a fast-moving horse drummed down the street. In the light from a saloon Frazer saw that the rider was a girl. The next instant as the girl drew her mount to a rearing halt at the edge of the crowd he saw Margo.

"Tom!" she cried in sudden fear. Her eyes darted from Winston's dour face to Thorpe's sardonic, smiling one. She was bewildered. Some of the confusion got into her words. "What about the posse? I—I thought—"

Thorpe's eyes narrowed and his hard mouth flattened against his yellowed teeth.

"Posse, huh!" he shouted. "Your ramrod's in a tight he won't get out of. He was caught running off with Winston's wife!" While the mob pressed close, sensing new excitement, Thorpe added with wicked relish: "You're just in time to watch Frazer stretch a bit of hemp."

"You men are out of your minds!" Margo cried. Fear was like a weighted stone in her. But she showed Thorpe only anger and defiance. "Tom has been with me at the Double Y all day until just a little while ago. He hasn't had time to run away with anybody's wife!"

"How long ago was he there, Margo?"

Winston cut in.

"About an hour ago," she declared. "He left to ride to the Pothook to see Bassett about—"

"Margo!" Frazer's voice cut in quickly. "Stay out of this."

"But why, Tom?" Margo cried fiercely. "Why not let me tell them what happened?"

Thorpe, his face twisted in taut lines, lifted his strident voice above Margo's.

"We're wasting time talking here. It's plain enough that Margo is just trying to cover up for Frazer."

"You're afraid of what Tom knows!" Margo raged at him.

"What's that, Margo?" demanded Barton from the depths of the crowd. "Maybe it's something we'd all like to hear."

"Shut Barton up!" yelled Winston as he exchanged a sudden, nervous glance with Thorpe.

THERE was a scuffle in the crowd. Barton cursed as a couple of Circle W hands moved in on him. He struggled briefly, then went down as a gun barrel slammed against the side of his head.

Margo pushed her horse forward, striving to get near to Frazer.

"Tom," she said, "tell me what really happened."

He faced her across a sea of sweat-grimed faces. "I was on my way to the Pothook when I heard the roar of a landslide. I found a wrecked buckboard and I found Ella, half-buried in the dirt and shale. Winston's bunch arrived while I was trying to help Ella."

Margo twisted in the saddle. She regarded Winston with a cold and studied antagonism. "And that's your basis for wanting to hang Tom?"

"She was running away," Winston snapped. "You'll find a smashed suitcase in that buckboard behind you. It's Ella's." Blood suffused his cheeks. "Frazer's got a killing coming to him! He's always been sweet on Ella. Maybe you haven't had eyes to see that because you want Frazer for yourself."

An odd expression flickered in Margo's eyes. "You've got the wrong man," she said sharply. "I think I can tell you—"

Again Frazer's voice cut in to interrupt her. "Let it go, Margo."

She looked at him in perplexity. She saw the dull misery in his face. Suddenly she knew he was sacrificing himself for the man they both realized was guilty. Her eyes darted a question at Frazer. His answer was a faint shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Come on, Van!" shouted Thorpe. "We've dallied long enough. Let's get this necktie party started!"

"That's what I say!" shouted tall, lanky Pole Richmond as he cut a lane through the ranks of the crowd. His evil, grinning face jutted toward Frazer. "Here's your finish, bucko. I'm going to enjoy watching you choke."

Though Frazer's features were haggard, his smoky eyes were narrowed and intent. He said in a voice sharp as a sword:

"I'm not dead yet, Pole. You tried to kill me once. Remember?"

Margo whipped up her horse. The animal's powerful shoulders struck two men blocking her path. They jumped out of the way. She raked the crowd with a scornful challenge.

"Aren't there any men among you with the sense and the courage to stop this ugly farce?" She glanced from one to the other. She picked out a few of the storekeepers. "Johnson! Begley! Farning! How can you permit this to go on? Get out your guns!"

For a moment there was no answer. Then Johnson's meek voice replied:

"This is none of our business, Margo. We're family men. We don't aim to invite any trouble."

A hard laugh spilled from Thorpe. It was taken up by his callous crew. It spread to Winston's armed bunch.

Margo's angry cry tore at the crowd. "And you call yourselves men! You're worse than coyotes!"

With a savage gesture her hand sped to the .38 at her hip. She flipped it into her hand, drove her plunging mare straight at Guy Thorpe, firing as she charged.

One of the Big T riders crowded against her and slapped at her arm. The bullet meant for Thorpe drilled the air above his head.

"Margo, I tell you to stay out of this!" Frazer yelled.

"Get her out of here, Thorpe!" Winston cried.

Thorpe and the man who had spoiled Margo's aim wrestled with the furiously angry girl. Thoroughly outraged now, Margo tried to train the gun on Thorpe again. But the weapon was wrested from her fingers. Strong arms hauled her out of the saddle, dragged her to the ground and away from the middle of the street as she fought.

Frazer dug his heels into the flanks of his horse in a wild frenzy to reach Margo. But Winston closed in on one side, a knuckled fist swished through the air and caught him on the side of the jaw. Then Pole Richmond jammed his big gelding forward. He had a rope in his hand, a noose already fashioned.

"Here we go, Van!" he yelled. "We'll use my rope!"

* * * * *

ALL the noises pulsing through Bill Corey's skull swelled and retreated like the rhythmic beat of surf. He seemed to be in a deep black well. Now and then there were weird flashes of light. But always the darkness swept in again. It was a thick, miasmic fog. He imagined he was swimming in a gritty, sandy sea. His arms moved, but something had snared his legs. They were mired in slick, slimy mud. No matter how he thrashed about he could not free them.

Then as he floated in that dark sea of semi-consciousness he sorted the odd jumble of sounds he heard into voices. But they weren't clear. Suddenly they were cut off. He heard a creak and rattle, another sound like the drum of hoofs.

At last, he opened his eyes. That hoof clatter was distinct now, but going away. He was lying on his back. There was a fierce ache in his side. His head throbbed dully.

The sky was above him, the white flash of stars seemingly near. Moonlight bathed the shaly slope before him. It rose in a steep slant—and abruptly memory returned to him. With memory came horror and fear.

He recalled the wild ride in the buckboard with Ella Winston, the suffocating rush of the landslide. He remembered whipping up the team in a frantic effort to clear the slide, but he and Ella had caught the full brunt of that mountainous fall of loose earth.

He saw now that he was in the culvert beside the road and half-concealed behind thick brush, shale and dirt. That accounted for his nightmare of mud. Somehow he had been thrown clear when the wagon heeled over.

He dreaded the search that lay ahead of him. It required a great effort of will even to scramble clear of the confining shale and climb out of the culvert. His wound started bleeding again. Hot needles drilled through the lacerated flesh.

When he reached the road he had a clear look at the havoc created by the avalanche. All around, as though tossed by a giant hand, were huge chunks of rock torn from the bluff. Among the rocks rose a mound of dirt and shale. The buckboard was a total wreck. Splintered boards from its bed were strewn about. One horse was dead. The other had somehow got free of the wreckage and was grazing at the edge of the trees.

Corey made a complete circuit of the landslide. He dropped to his knees and pawed through the dirt, but found no sign of Ella. His fear grew. She might be buried at the bottom of the rubble! If that were so, he couldn't help her. It would take a big crew of men, armed with shovels and spades, to probe to the bottom of the avalanche.

No, he told himself, surely Ella must have been thrown clear just as he had been. Yet a thorough search of the culvert revealed nothing. Those horsemen he'd heard when he was regaining consciousness! Perhaps they had found Ella and taken her into town. He would have

to run the risk of going to Two Forks to find out. He had to know what had happened to Ella. As for the danger involved, he no longer cared. Though if any of the Big T riders were in town he could count on trouble. They'd be after his hide.

But nothing mattered now. He'd broken with Thorpe, he'd killed Richmond and he'd tried to run off with another man's wife. It was over the hill for him. But first he had to satisfy himself about Ella, even though his strength was at a low ebb.

Scrambling through the rubble to the idly grazing horse, he pulled him toward the slide. Using a mound of dirt as a platform, Corey succeeded in climbing onto the horse's back. However, the first step the gelding took told Corey he was in for an ordeal of physical punishment. But he set his will against the pain and weakness and pushed on.

THE steady jog of the horse, the heavy sledging rhythm of agony in Corey's body merged into one endless nightmare. Several times he nearly slipped from the bare back of the horse. Each time a frantic clutch at the animal's thick mane saved him from a fall. He knew if he ever toppled off the horse he wouldn't be able to muster the strength to remount.

After what seemed an age he saw a cluster of yellow lights. They cut a wide swathe in the blackness of the night. He was on the outskirts of Two Forks.

He rode down a short slope, saw Main Street before him and quickly steered the horse into an alley. Perspiration covered him from head to foot, yet there was a deep-seated chill in his bones. He understood the significance of that. His fever was mounting.

He knew he needed a doctor and wondered if he could risk going to see Doc Marlow. Immediately he told himself this was impossible, especially if Ella had been brought in. There would be a crowd around, as well as Winston's bunch. No, if he were going to see a doctor he'd have to wait until he got to Dunbar—if he ever got there.

The horse threaded its way through the litter of the alley. Tin cans and crates and boxes covered the ground in back of the stores. Corey was halfway down the first street when he heard the clamor of voices. Shouts and yells filled the air. Gritting his teeth against the pain that assailed him, Corey pushed on at a faster gait.

He crossed an empty side street, moved along the rear lots behind the main street. The racket grew louder. Someone shouted Tom Frazer's name. Corey's heart suddenly pumped a hot surge of blood into his head. The voice that had cried Tom's name sounded like Margo's!

Corey slid from the horse at the junction of another narrow alley with the main street. He went forward a few steps before his legs gave way and he fell. His vision was hazy. Cobwebs were strung across his brain. But he got his hands underneath his body and pushed upward. Somehow he scrambled erect.

Supporting himself against the wall of the hotel, he stumbled toward the street. Men were gathered in front of the hotel. Others milled about in the center of the street. Some of the men were on horseback. Shouting voices filled the night.

From the shadows he heard a couple of men talking. Ella Winston's name was mentioned. He caught the words "Doc Marlow" and "she's bad hurt." He felt a brief relief that she had been rescued from the slide.

Then he stiffened when he saw Margo seated on her horse, her face flushed, exchanging angry words with Thorpe. He heard the Big T owner tell her that Tom Frazer had tried to run off with Ella and the crowd intended to hang him for it.

Corey's head jerked up. Finally he saw Frazer—and Tom was a prisoner! His hands were bound behind his back and his look was grim.

Corey's teeth ground together. This was a lot worse than he had anticipated. Not only had his and Ella's plan to escape blown up in their faces, but by some quirk of fate Frazer, the man he had wronged in so many ways, was being accused of Corey's misdeed.

Corey groaned. He had made a mess of his own life. He had betrayed the only real friend he'd ever had. Now that friend was about to die because of him.

He forgot the knives of pain that lashed at his side. He forgot his terrible weakness. He had room for just one thing in his mind. He had to get Frazer out of this!

CHAPTER XVII

Atonement

COREY drew out his gun. His arm shook when he levelled it. Three men came along the walk, pushed closer to the fringes of the mob. Margo was crying out that Frazer was the wrong man. Then Corey received a second shock when the knot of riders around Frazer parted and Pole Richmond, a dirty bandage around his head, appeared. Corey's last memory of Richmond was of seeing the big ramrod fall, with blood pouring from his forehead.

Corey felt the hot anger in him come to a quick boil. His fingers tightened around the handle of his Colt. He had taken the first step to charge straight into the crowd, when Margo sent her horse crashing into the men, berating the mob, pleading for someone to stop the hanging.

A sudden idea leaped into Corey's brain. Margo would never get any action from that crowd. But it had just come to him—the one slim chance to break up this grim gathering.

Corey moved around to the back door of the hotel, crept into the darkened hallway. The lobby was deserted. With one hand clutching his side and the other gripping his .45, he climbed to the second floor and swung down the corridor to the front of the building.

Outside, Frazer was tugging desperately at the tight cords that bound his wrists. A rider behind him yelled a warning.

"Watch out, Pole! Frazer's trying to get his hands loose."

"Let him!" scoffed Richmond. "In a minute or two he'll be dragging his weight at the end of this rope!"

Noose in hand, the Big T foreman leaned toward Frazer, ready to flip the circle of rope around the Double Y ramrod's throat.

"Drop that rope or I'll put a bullet through your heart!"

The order was a harsh, strident cry slicing through the taut stillness that had suddenly fallen upon the mob.

Frazer, recognizing Bill Corey's voice, looked up at the slanting board porch roof in front of the hotel. Every man in the crowd followed his gaze.

Standing in full view was Corey, a rumpled, disheveled figure. His hair straggled across his face. He swayed as if he were drunk. But the six-gun in his right hand was as steady as a rock. And there was no mistaking the deadly set of his mouth.

The gun barrel in his fist dipped up and down. "Make one move for your six, Richmond, and you're a dead man!" He added viciously: "This time I'll do more than crease your skull!"

"Get out of here before it's too late, Corey!" warned Winston.

"You shut up and listen to me, Winston," grated Corey. He swayed, then caught himself. "You're looking for the hombre that ran away with your wife tonight. Well, I'm your huckleberry!"

There was a concerted gasp, followed by a low, aroused murmuring. Corey saw the massed hostility of the Big T crew. They were primed to go into action against him. Thorpe's gun was lifting, swinging around toward him. He didn't have much time. He glanced swiftly at Frazer, wondering how much of a chance he was really giving his friend. Frazer was pretty well hemmed in, and Richmond still held the noose ready.

"I've got the man I want!" roared Winston. "Put your gun away!"

"No, Winston!" shouted Corey. "And

here's something else for the whole blasted town to chew on. It's time Two Forks found out about the kind of dirty game you and—"

Corey never got a chance to finish. Thorpe's gun arm whipped around in a rapid arc. Then muzzle light jumped from the Big T owner's gun bore.

Corey folded up, dropped to his knees. He hauled his Colt up and fired at Thorpe, an insane laugh bubbling from his mouth. Then he sagged down on his face. He didn't even see that Thorpe's plunging horse had carried the Big T owner out of the path of his shot. The bullet intended for Thorpe struck one of his riders.

AT THE flash of Thorpe's gun Frazer gave a final, frenzied wrench at his bonds. The pigging string loosened. Suddenly his hands were free. He sank his spurs into the gelding's flanks and the animal jumped full-tilt into the two Circle W riders blocking his path. One man was jarred out of the saddle as the gelding struck his horse with pile-driving force. The other man levered his gun. A red streamer of flame slid past Frazer's right cheek. Then he smashed the fellow's jaw with a looping right. The man fell.

Frazer charged toward the walk. Guns boomed behind him. The gelding hit a running man who went down, screaming, as he rolled away from the gelding's hoofs.

At the edge of the walk Frazer leaped from the saddle. A Big T rider cut along the hitch rack toward him. The man's gun bloomed ruddily in the night. A porch post took the full brunt of the slug as Frazer dived under the rail and made for the porch.

"After him, you buckos!" shouted Winston.

"Bottle him up in the hotel!" Richmond yelled.

Frazer plunged through the open doorway. A volley of shots followed him. One slug splintered the lintel of the door. A second tugged at his shirt sleeve. Tumult rose behind him. Boots thumped the walk. The wail of six-guns rose in an angry dirge.

He flung himself up the steps, two at a time, and whirled toward the front of the hotel. He struck a door at the end of the corridor, flung it open with a sweep of his arm.

Once inside he slammed it shut, flipped the bolt into its slot. He was breathing hard now. Time was running out. He heard the racket on the stairs that told him his pursuers were close behind.

He was fully aware that by running into the hotel he had stepped into a trap. But there was Corey to think of. He had to see what could be done for Corey before he made his own break.

The window of the darkened room made a pale wedge of light in the gloom. Frazer stumbled to it. It was open. He bent his long body, scrambled out on the tilted roof. Behind him he heard heavy bodies smashing against the bolted door. Then the booming roar of guns.

"Try the other doors!" somebody yelled.

There was a rush for one of the other doors. Again came the splintering crash of huge men flinging themselves against resisting wooden panels.

Frazer's sun-browned jaw knotted. If those doors held for only a few minutes more!

He slid down the roof to where Corey was lying in a limp heap. A crowd still surged in the street, but Frazer had to take a chance on being seen. From the clamor in the hall most of Winston's and Thorpe's men must have charged into the hotel.

Frazer tugged at Corey. "Bill! It's me—Tom!"

Corey stirred, rolled half on his side. A bloody bubble broke from his lips, and his breathing was a thin, agonized thread of sound. A shudder wracked his body.

"I—I'm going out, Tom," he whispered.

"I'll get Thorpe," grated Frazer. He heard the solid smash of bodies hitting the door of the room he had gone through. In a second or two Winston's men would gain admittance.

"Bill—Bill!" he said. "Why did you do it? I mean Ella."

"I—I've been a fool—all my life," gasped Corey. His lips twisted in a painful grin. "Should have listened to you, kid. We—we might have—" A faint rattle sounded in his throat. On his lips was bright red blood. "Get Thorpe—for—me. Thorpe—and—Winston handling the—the rustling together."

Frazer felt a dull ache of sorrow. Corey was dying, and there was nothing he could do for him.

"Bill," he said, "are you sure about that?"

THERE was more shouting inside the hotel. Frazer barely caught Corey's labored reply.

"Yeah. I—I ought—to—be sure. I—I've been riding with them."

The shock was like a dash of cold water in Frazer's face. "Bill," he cried, "you're out of your head!"

Corey's eyes were blurred and weary. His shaggy head moved slightly. "Wish I—was. Sorry—Tom. I—I'm one fine friend." His right hand groped for his Colt. "My—my gun," he gasped. "You—may need it. Get away while—"

He stiffened in Frazer's arms, then fell back, limp in death.

A hot stab of agony raked Frazer. His teeth ground together in a silent oath.

A splintering crash, followed by a triumphant yell brought Frazer to his feet. The weathered building trembled to the heavy tramp of booted feet in the room beyond. One of the Circle W punchers appeared in the window. He fired at Frazer's crouching shape. Frazer whirled, Corey's gun in his fist, and drove the man from the window with one telling shot.

Somewhere inside the hotel another crash sounded. Frazer ran along the porch roof, pumped a slug into the adjoining window as a man's thick figure outlined the pane. The glass blew inward and the man spun away, screaming.

A half-dozen horses were tied to the hitching-rail at the far corner of the hotel. Frazer stumbled across the sloping roof. He went down on one knee as a new attack from one of the windows sent bullets siging over his head. He snapped a shot through each window, then lurched to the roof edge.

Directly below him three men were running along the plank sidewalk to cut him off. A red flame gushed from a tilted gun barrel aimed in Frazer's direction. He jumped right into their midst. His left boot struck one man on the neck and felled him. The other two punchers went down with Frazer in a threshing tangle of arms and legs.

A flailing fist grazed Frazer's jaw. He shoved one fellow's body from him, pistol-whipped the remaining man on the right temple and got up.

Men were running toward him from all directions. Guns were booming from the hotel windows. But he ducked under the hitch-rack, freed the reins of a bony gray gelding and lifted himself into the saddle. Rearing away from the tie-rail, he sent the horse pounding down the street. At the first intersection, he cut through a dark alley at a fast gallop.

He struck some brush, but set the half-frightened horse right through the bushes. Once in that frail cover he gradually angled back toward the main road.

He knew it would not take long for pursuit to shape up. Neither Winston nor Thorpe could afford to let him run free now. One thing that was bothering Frazer was the failure of Tex White to put in an appearance with the riders from the Dale Roush and Ad Simmons outfits. He had been counting on those two ranches for help. Now his only logical course was to find them.

Frazer kept on at a dead run until the sound of a big party of riders sent its unmistakable vibrations through the night. Frazer hauled in the gray. He slid from the saddle, paused at the edge of the road, and decided that since the noise was approaching out of the south it might be Tex and the bunch from the Roush and Simmons spreads.

He got back on the gray, jammed fresh bullets into Corey's six-gun and rode slowly forward.

A column of horsemen topped a little

rise and clattered toward him. The leaders spotted him at once, and a long yell challenged him.

"Who's that?" It was Tex White's voice.

Frazer immediately answered: "Frazer!"

ANOTHER yell rolled up echoes in the night. The riders whipped toward him in a boiling cloud of dust. As they pulled up in the middle of the road Frazer had a quick glimpse of Dale Roush and Ad Simmons flanking Tex. Then a little behind those three he saw the still more welcome figure of Sheriff Fred Landon.

"Something go wrong in town, Tom?" Tex asked.

"Plenty," said Frazer. "But I'm glad you're all here. We're going to need every man's gun."

The sheriff pushed his horse forward. "What's up, Tom?"

"Tarnation's busted loose for sure."

"Tex told us about the stolen beefs in the hills," said Landon. "I'd just ridden into Roush's place from Dragoon. If you can lead us to those cow critters we'll lay a trap for those Big T waddies."

"No time for that now," said Frazer, talking fast while he cocked his head to listen for sounds of horsemen coming from town. "The Big T and the Circle W are both on my tail and spoiling for a fight."

Then in a few concise words he told all that had happened since he had first run across the smashed buckboard on the Dunbar road.

"You say Ella's hurt and Corey's dead?" exclaimed Landon.

"Yeah." Frazer's voice was dull and leaden. "Doc Marlow's taking care of Ella now. Don't know if she'll pull through. But Thorpe got Bill, right after Bill tried to tell the crowd that Winston and Thorpe were handling the rustling together."

"I can hardly believe that!" muttered Roush, a heavily built man with ruddy full cheeks and dark blue eyes.

"But don't forget that Corey owned up to riding with the Big T bunch," pointed out Landon. "A fellow that's dying can be pretty well figured to tell the truth."

"I hear riders coming!" called Tex. "Sounds like a big bunch, too!"

"Winston and Thorpe!" murmured Frazer.

Landon took immediate charge. "I'll handle this," he said. "No shooting unless they fire first."

"All right," said Frazer. "But spread out and be ready to burn some powder."

"I'm ready," growled Roush. "If Thorpe and Winston are the buckos who've been running off my cows along with everybody else's I sure as blazes want to get in on this ruckus."

The racket of the approaching party of horsemen grew to a heavy din. Then around a bend in the road came the riders. Suddenly seeing the spread-out bunch of men blocking their advance they pulled to a halt. Moonlight glittered on rifles and six-guns.

"Is that you Winston?" called Landon.

"Yeah, Sheriff," Winston's voice was a guttural growl. "We're after Tom Frazer."

"I'm right here, Van," said Frazer and added on a shrill note, "And the sheriff's heard my story!"

Roush's angry voice cut in, "You and Thorpe have done your last rustling in Two Forks."

"Shut up, Roush!" shouted Landon. "I'm handling this." The sheriff raised his voice. "Winston, you and your party head back to town. We'll—"

The roar of a gunshot, punctuated by a crimson spear of flame, broke into the lawman's order. He uttered a strangled gasp and pitched forward against his saddle-horn.

Frazer rode up to him. "Landon!"

The sheriff lifted a pain-wracked face. "I'm all right. Gun them down. We—we've got our answer!"

Suddenly the crashing beat of guns tore the night into shreds. Landon got a hold on himself. He straightened with an effort, curveted his horse to one side.

"Spread out! Spread out!" Frazer warned the riders at his back as Winston and Thorpe led their men in a swift, savage onslaught upon the posse.

CHAPTER XVIII

Last Roundup

IN THAT first wild rush, two of Roush's punchers went down. Frazer lined his sights on a rider's heaving shape, charging toward him. He felt the hot whisper of lead passing by. Then a riderless horse bolted across the posse line at a tangent and he knew he'd scored a hit.

Dust swirled in a heavy cloud. Horses whinnied, men yelled and shouted. The darkness was alive to the winking red glare of six-guns. The acrid taint of powdersmoke hung in the air. Frazer saw, with concern, that the brunt of Winston's attack was hitting the center of the posse's line.

"Drop back and fan around them!" he called out.

Roush and Simmons cut in beside him, shooting as they came.

"We've got to get them into our center, then outflank them," Frazer told them.

"Good idea!" panted Roush. "I'll take the left flank."

He rode away, calling out to a half-dozen of his men to follow him. Frazer and Simmons dropped farther back. Bullets swept over them in a lethal spray. As a wedge of riders angled toward them, Frazer ducked into the trees, Simmons on his heels.

A few yards off the road Frazer knifed in and out of the brush. The shooting remained undiminished. Suddenly he cut sharply back to the road again. A knot of four riders were spurring toward him.

"Come and get it, friends!" Frazer cried.

All four riders twisted in the saddle, alert to the attack on this new quarter. Their guns swung around in a glittering arc. Two of them never got to fire, for Frazer dropped one man with a snap shot from the hip, and Roush unseated the other with a bullet high in the shoulder.

Panic hit the remaining two punchers. They yelled: "Big T! Here!"

Frazer rode in. His down-chopping gun caught one fellow on the head and spilled him from the saddle. The last man bolted into the brush beside the road. Frazer took after him. But at the edge of the trees he skidded to a halt and turned to face a wave of Big T and Circle W riders galloping back toward town. Caught in the pocket created by Frazer's flanking maneuver, they were making a desperate dash through the gauntlet of lead hurled by the posse.

Frazer spotted Guy Thorpe at the head of the phalanx. The Big T owner was lashing his horse to a full gallop, intent only upon escaping the trap. Frazer cut toward him and yelled: "Thorpe!"

The renegade rancher swept up his gun and fired across the saddle. The shot was a clear miss. But when Frazer fired at Thorpe's bobbing shape he saw the rustler's tall figure jerk under the solid thump of lead. Thorpe's horse carried him for fifty feet before he fell.

Roush and Simmons were yelling somewhere nearby. From both sides of the road came a raking volley that took its toll of the Circle W and Big T riders. Three more saddles were emptied. Frazer cut alongside the fleeing renegades. As a gun blazed close to his face, the slug narrowly missing his check, he saw the hate-filled countenance of Pole Richmond. The white bandage on the Big T ramrod's forehead was a sure target in the uncertain light.

"Now we'll end it, Pole!" Frazer shouted, prodding his gelding into a faster run.

Richmond pumped another shot at Frazer. It burned across the flesh of Frazer's upper left arm. Frazer lifted his own Colt, flipped the hammer. He felt the kick of the weapon's recoil against his wrist. Richmond's gurgling cry of pain was almost lost in the thunder of hoofs. The Big T ramrod half-lifted out of his saddle, then pitched head-first to the road.

Simultaneously a riderless mount

crashed into Frazer's gelding. Both horses went down. Frazer barely freed his boots in time to escape being crushed. He hit the ground with a solid jolt, scrambled clear.

The gelding was up almost instantly, unhurt. Frazer grabbed the bridle and swung aboard. Sheriff Landon's deep call reached him from the rear as he saw the last of the Circle W and Big T riders go past him in a blur of speed.

FRAZER cut back into the middle of the road. Other riders converged from the trees and brush. Landon, holding himself stiffly in the saddle, rode up.

"You going to let the rest of them get away?" Frazer demanded.

"No!" said Landon, his left hand pressed to his side. His shirt was wet with blood. "But you fellows will have to carry on without me. I want those men caught or run clear out of the country!"

"Let's go," said Roush. "They'll head straight for the hills—maybe stop off for their bedrolls if they have time."

Frazer started off with them. Landon called him back.

"Tom, you stick with me. I'll want you to help round up some other men to see about those stolen cattle." The sheriff nodded to Dale Roush. "Go ahead, Roush. Take them away!"

With a yell Roush led the posse down the road at a fast run. They vanished around a bend, though the echoes of their hard travel lingered.

"How many men did we lose? Frazer asked somberly.

"Four or five," said the sheriff. "But only one is dead—a puncher from Roush's outfit. The others will pull through, I reckon. . . . See any sign of Winston?"

"He got away. Luckier than Richmond and Thorpe."

"They were downed?" Landon asked.

"Yeah. Richmond is through. About Thorpe, I'm not sure. I drilled him, saw him fall, but that's all."

"We'll have a look," suggested Landon, "then head for town and get buckboards out here to bring in the wounded."

The two men came upon two wounded punchers before finding Guy Thorpe. The Big T owner had been shot high in the chest and seemed to be in bad shape. But he was still breathing.

"I'd like to get Thorpe into Two Forks to Doc Marlowe," said Landon. "He might do some talking that'll give us an' open and shut case against Winston."

"You won't need it," said Frazer. "Firing on your bunch marked him good."

"Right. But a little extra evidence like a confession from Thorpe will wind everything up legal."

At last they topped a slight knoll. Below them the lights of the town made an oblong yellow wedge of brilliance in the steel-black night. Lights from the hotel winked across the road's gray dust. The sound of their horses drew a knot of men from one of the saloons. A few others hurried from the hotel.

"It's the sheriff!" someone yelled. "And Frazer's with him!"

Frazer's hand crept to his gun. True, the real trouble-makers in the lynch mob had been the Big T and Circle W punchers. But he wasn't taking any chances of being knocked out of the saddle by some gun-crazy fool.

The sheriff pushed out ahead of Frazer. His voice sounded a warning.

"Hold everything, gents! Tom Frazer's in the clear. The Big T and Circle W are the outfits I'm after tonight!"

Surprised murmurs rippled through the listening men. There was a sudden flash of light from Doc Marlow's house as the door opened and closed. Margo came out into the street. She called Tom's name and ran forward.

Frazer lifted his hand to her in greeting. Then his eyes caught a flicker of movement in the shadows of an alley he was passing. His keyed-up nerves telegraphed a warning to his brain. He was driving the gelding toward the plank sidewalk when a ruddy lance of flame leaped out of the alley toward him, and the following roar of a shot.

The gelding staggered in mid-stride. The ambush slug meant for Frazer had

hit the horse's shoulder. Frazer jumped clear, landed on hands and knees in the dust, hearing Margo's frightened cry and the shouts of the crowd.

THE ambusher fired one more wild shot. Frazer pumped a slug toward the spot where he had seen the ambusher's muzzle flare. But the pounding beat of feet running down the alley told him the fellow was in full flight.

"Frazer!" the sheriff yelled. "Wait!"

But Frazer was in no mood to wait. This was his fight, and his alone. He knew who the ambusher was. It had to be Van Winston. Pole Richmond was dead. Guy Thorpe was badly wounded out on the Dragoon road. The remainder of the Circle W and Big T crews looked after their own skins, for theirs was a shallow loyalty bought with gun-slick wages.

The only man with a stake in the game was Van Winston. For years he'd been the big man on the range. But he'd been greedy for more land, more cattle, more power. Now the definite linking of his outfit with the rustling had shown Winston clearly enough that his reign as kingpin of Two Forks had terminated.

He was a man with nothing to fight for. He had a wife who obviously didn't want him and had tried to run away with another man. It would seem there was nothing for Winston to do but run. Yet knowing the stubborn and inexorable drive of his will, Frazer saw that it was inevitable for Winston to stay on long enough to strike a telling blow at the man who symbolized his own ruin. And that man, Frazer realized, was himself. Winston could be a bulldog with a bulldog's tenacity when he wanted something badly enough. And right now he wanted Frazer dead.

But he was pitting himself against a man even more tenacious than himself. For Frazer's life had been a succession of hard risks. Action and violence were the wine of his existence. And with the memory of Bill Corey's death to goad him on, he was recklessly agreeable to settling with Winston.

A cold fury sent him in a headlong charge toward the alley. As he entered the narrow areaway between the Mercantile and a feed store, far down the alley a gun roared and bullet whined along the frame side of the feed store. He saw Winston's heavy, running shape vanish around the rear of the building.

Grimly Frazer plunged on, well aware of the risk he ran. Winston might be hiding just beyond the rear wall, waiting to blast him at close range. But Frazer was too furious to permit any such consideration to halt his rush. He had his gun at full cock, ready to trade shots at a second's notice.

Somewhere behind him he heard the yelling of the crowd. Once he imagined he heard Margo calling him. Then he reached the end of the alley, took a headlong plunge past it, whirling to face the rear lots and half-expecting to be greeted by the roar of a six-gun.

But the darkened area behind the store was empty. Winston had fled to some other point of vantage. Frazer stopped, flattened against the wall and listened for the sound of a running horse. All he heard was the hubbub in the street.

Frazer slid along the wall. The next building jutted out more and he had to circle barrels and crates. All his nerves were taut, his eyes were narrowed, his face drawn and hard.

He came to another alley, approached it warily, his Colt lifted. A dry twig crackled under his right boot. He dropped to one knee, expecting a shot. None came. The darkness here was oppressive.

He cut into the alley, walked softly back toward the main street. Nothing stirred in the deep shadows, but a steady warning quivered in the still air. The silence was solid, yet volatile.

At the mouth of the alley he paused to study the street. All the buildings were in darkness. There was a vagrant shout or so from the direction of the hotel. The crowd there was sensing the nature of this grim fight.

Frazer's narrowed eyes darted from building to building, prying into the shad-

ows. Suddenly a trembling went through him. Almost directly opposite him at the head of a facing alley there was a vague, indefinable stir in the shadows. It was nothing more than a meager leavening of the deep darkness, but Frazer guessed that Winston was there, probably watching the alley out of which Frazer must come.

FRAZER was reasonably certain Winston could not see him since he was flattened against the wall. Abruptly he retreated toward the rear lots. Once out of the alley, he ran lightly but swiftly for an entire block before racing up another alley to the main street. Here, too, the street was in darkness.

Winston would be watching the buildings directly in his line of vision. He would not be looking for his quarry this far south. Frazer crouched low and dashed across the street into another narrow aperture between stores.

Reaching the empty back lots, he cut back toward Winston's position. He was careful to count the stores he passed. Then, at last, he came to the alley where the Circle W rancher was posted.

Frazer drifted into the opening, started a slow glide toward the street. He moved with a catlike stealth, his gun held hip-high. When the showdown arrived he would be cool.

He got within thirty yards of Winston and still Winston did not turn. The Circle W rancher, against the wall of the building on his left, faced the main street.

Frazer pulled to the center of the alley and stopped. His low, flat voice reached out for Winston like a plucking hand.

"Look behind you, Winston!"

Winston whirled and shot in one frenzied motion. It was what Frazer had expected him to do. The bullet slammed into the wall close to Frazer's right arm. Then Frazer's gun roared into the echo of Winston's Colt. The big rancher uttered a stifled gasp, reeled, and slid to the ground. Frazer heard the dull clatter of his gun striking the earth. Winston was dead.

Frazer walked out into the street. Light from a waving lantern moved toward him, and he hurried forward to meet the men advancing from the hotel. Then a slender, curly-haired girl broke from that group and ran out ahead.

"Tom!" cried Margo.

"It's all right, Margo," Frazer called.

Then she was running forward, to fling herself into his arms.

"Oh, Tom!" she sobbed. "I was so afraid!" She lifted her face. "The sheriff said he thought it was Van Winston. Was it?"

Frazer nodded, still holding her close, her warm body against his. Margo was his, at last, and that was all that he asked out of life.

"It's all over, Margo," he murmured. "The fight is won." Then he looked down at her, his eyes tender. He added softly: "But for us, this is only the beginning."

Margo's arms slid up around his neck. The warm magic of love glowed in her eyes. "Yes, Tom," she whispered. "Only the beginning."

He kissed her, then. And she clung to him as if she couldn't bear to let him go again.

Suddenly they became aware of voices around them. Landon, a make-shift bandage bound to his side, came up at the end of the crowd.

"Winston?"

"Yeah," said Frazer. He pointed to the alley. "He's back there."

Landon nodded. "The crowd here has heard the real story. Some of the boys are ready to ride for the hills to see about rounding up those cattle. Doc Marlow says Ella will be all right. She's got a couple of smashed ribs and a concussion."

With his arm still around Margo, Frazer lifted his red head and grinned. "The cattle," he said, "can wait until morning."

Landon stared at Frazer, then at Margo. She flushed, but let her head remain on Frazer's shoulder.

"I reckon they can," Landon agreed and matched Frazer's grin with a grin of his own.

SMART STRANGER

By

HAPSBURG LIEBE

Just how clever must a lawbreaker be to succeed?

JIMMY LELLMAN rode into semi-darkness behind the big combination saloon and dance hall, dismounted and tied to a liveoak sapling. His eyes, long weary of sun and purple distances, brightened as he listened to string band music and laughter. So near to the Border that a third of its patronage was Mexican, the place was as colorful as it was wild.

He went in through an open window and sank to a chair at a rear table hidden in shadows. His leathered old Colt six-shooter nestled conveniently in his lap. A grizzled old desert rat prospector staggered up to him. " 'Scuse me, son. You seen anything of Pat Browder?"

"Sure haven't," answered young Jimmy Lellman.

The *viejo* lurched into the crowd. A stranger sat down across the table from Jimmy. The newcomer was about thirty years old. His clothing was unkempt.

"What'll you have, gents?" queried a white-aproned waiter.

"Soda pop for mine," said Lellman. "Red and purty. And see that she's plenty cool."

"Dissipatin' like usual," muttered the waiter, his face wise. "What's yours, pardner?"

"Same," the other gent at the table muttered. The waiter snorted and slipped away.

The stranger's manner now was cocksure. In a twinkling he became one of those people who cannot possibly be mistaken on any count.

"Alcohol," he told Jimmy, "always dumbs me up. You've found that out, too, young fella, eh?"

"Well, I hadn't figured that angle much. I—" Lellman broke off and began frowning toward a knot of cowboys and miners that was forming near the front entrance. Nodding in that direction he said to the strange man, "Wonder what's up?"

"News has just got in that the Oro City Kid was shot and killed over in Bledsoe County," the stranger replied. "I can see that you belong around here. Did you know the Kid?"

LELLMAN nodded. "I sure did know him. In fact, he was a right good friend of mine. I'm Jim Lellman. Hear

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anything about who done that shootin', and why?"

"I'm Ben Todd. Wasn't any particulars, the sheriff told me." Ben Todd began to look more important than ever. "These bad actors give me a deep pain, Lellman. They're all numbskulls; they simply don't use their heads at all. Wear guns as long as their arms, out in plain view, instead of a thirty-eight or a forty-one in their armpits and out of sight. Some of 'em dress fancy, instead of dressing as much like other folks as they can. Pull off most of their jobs in broad daylight, riding horses that everybody knows. Yet they wear masks. Rank idiots!"

Lellman grinned, his eyes holding a strange light. "And then," he said, "they'll hang around in that same section and get caught, rather than hightail for some other section where nobody knows 'em."

"Right," Todd agreed promptly. He seemed happy that his expert efficiency was appreciated. "And another thing. These—"

The half-liquored old-timer was back. He put bony hands on the little table in the shadows and blinked at them. "'Scuse me, gents. Honest, I'm a good feller. You seen anything of Pat Browder?"

"Sure haven't," Jimmy said.

The old-timer vanished in the crowd. Todd picked up his thread of talk:

"And another thing. These bad hombres just have to make a grandstand play. Big noise, y'know. If it was me, I'd spot a man with money on him right here in town, sneak after him and pull my stick-up on foot in the dark. Of course, I'd wear a mask, just in case. Then I'd be back among people quick as a wink, and nobody'd ever guess it was me. Say, who's this Pat Browder, anyway?"

"Why, Pat owns this place," answered Jimmy Lellman. "Don't hang around much, though. Comes in every night, empties out the cash registers and goes back home. If you'll watch awhile, you'll see him—fat, bald, not too friendly. The *viejo* was after a grubstake, is my bet, and ain't likely to get it."

"The common or garden variety of stick-ups," Ben Todd went on, "so often overlook the important little things. I heard of one over in Texas who wore a big silver ring on his right hand. He forgot to take the ring off during a stage robbery, and killed the driver, and so that ring hung him. You got to lay plans ahead, and everything's got to be right."

"Yeah," drawled Lellman. His idly wandering gaze fell upon the drinking prospector, who was still looking for Pat Browder. "You ever pulled any stick-ups yourself, pardner?"

"Why, no, of course not," too quickly answered Ben Todd, "I was just airing my views. I'm a bug on the matter of efficiency in any line at all. It was the Oro City Kid getting killed that started me talking."

"He wasn't such a bad little hombre," Lellman said. "Mostly just wild-cat devilment. Hell on playin' jokes, a good many of 'em on sheriffs. But nearly all the law dogs liked the Kid. It was sort of funny to hear a sheriff say, 'Watch your step, Oro City, while you're in *my* town.' Last time I saw him, the law didn't have a thing on him. He sure could shoot. I bet you one thing, Todd, which same is this. He was shot in the back, if he was shot."

"Uh—no doubt," muttered Todd.

"And here's somethin' else I'll leave with you," Lellman said. "I sure better not find out who shot him."

There was a queer look in the stranger's eye, visible even here in the dimness. "What's eatin' you, feller?" Lellman clipped.

NO RESPONSE came from the stranger. The wise-faced waiter came again to the small table in the rear. Jimmy ordered another bottle of strawberry soda. Ben Todd came to himself with a jerk. He shook his head at the waiter, yawned, and took out his watch. It wasn't far from midnight. He said he thought maybe he'd better be going to the hotel and to bed. Then, very casually, he rose and headed for the front entrance.

"Smart fella," observed Jimmy to himself, smiling a hard smile.

When Lellman's little bottle no longer showed red, he remembered, with something in the nature of a pang, that his horse hadn't been fed since early morning. Late as it was, there'd be somebody at the liveryman's. So there he went.

On his way back toward Browder's place a quarter of an hour afterward, Jimmy saw that the sheriff's office was lighted. Voices coming from within kicked his curiosity up. He stepped across the threshold and halted, gasping.

Slumped in the desk-chair, bleeding about the head, was Pat Browder!

"What happened?" asked Jimmy innocently, noting that the doctor was working with Browder and that the grizzled sheriff stood close by. The lawman answered without looking around.

"Stranger who calls himself Ben Todd trailed Pat and robbed him. Didn't shoot him—shooting would've made noise—just beat him half to death with the barrel of a hookbill gun. Pat had been to his place, and had the night's take on him."

"Todd get away with the *dinero?*"

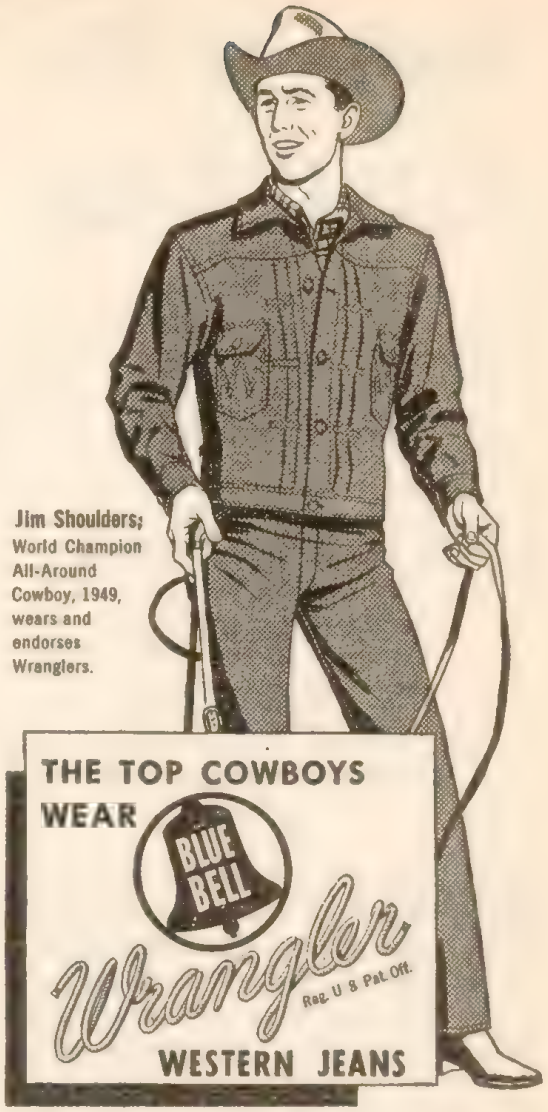
"Like blazes," the sheriff snapped. "The cash is there in my desk, and Todd is in a jail cell. I caught the hellion even before I knew what he'd done. Easiest job I've ever had."

Lellman grinned. "Todd was supposed to be smart, wasn't he?"

The officer jerked around and saw who it was that he'd been talking with. "Look, Oro City, watch your step when you're in *my* town! Great little stringer, ain't you? Putting out word that you'd been killed over in Bledsoe was your idea of a joke, wasn't it? Finding the money on Todd was what cinched it, Oro. After he'd pulled the stick-up he slipped back to the street, and was walking along whistling like he'd only been to supper or something. Y'ought to seen him wilt when I stuck my gun in his ribs."

"But how'd you know enough to nail him so prompt?" asked Jimmy.

"Oh, Kid," laughed the lawman. "It was sure funny. That jigger smart? Why, the dang fool had plumb forgot to take his mask off!"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Dance at My FUNERAL

By
DAN KIRBY

A cold-blooded killer's not so cold when the ghost of guilt suddenly shows up!

DUDE SELBY

DUDE SELBY stood in the shaft of light from the open door of the schoolhouse and rolled a smoke, his cat green eyes glued on the dim figure of the man moving along the board walk across the street. Inside the schoolhouse he could hear Dad Ty's fiddle opening up the Saturday night dance with the easy rhythm of a Spanish Two Step. But Dude's mind wasn't on dancing tonight. He was thinking, *There he goes now, with ten thousand folding money strapped around his fat belly and looking like any other patched-pants saddle tramp.* The thought sent a cold tingling up Dude's spine and he wiped the palms of his hands on his new moleskin pants.

Behind him a window raised and Jake Cotton, a local lawyer, stuck his head out. "You comin' in, Dude?" he called, then added jokingly, "you got half the ladies waiting."

Dude took a final drag from his cigarette and watched the man across the street disappear inside the Black Jack Saloon. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah, I'm comin' in, Jake."

He flipped away his cigarette and turned into the schoolhouse. He was a young man, in his late twenties, tall and whip lean with crisp, blonde hair and cool eyes that never quite lived up to the easy warmth of his smile. He was smiling now as he moved toward the long plank bar to check his Stetson and gun.

Old Tom Snipes nodded as Dude tossed his hat on a peg and unbuckled the forty-five from around his waist. "Good crowd," the oldster said amiably, "Dan Trimble's got his niece from New Orleans here."

He took two metal discs, half the size of a poker chip, with holes drilled near the rim. He stuck one on the nail where he hung Dude's gun and handed the other to Dude. "Dan says his niece has had kind of a dull visit. He figured maybe she'd find enough excitement here tonight to perk her up a mite."

An odd thought struck Dude and his

grin broadened. "Now she just might do that," he said, and moved off toward the back of the big room where the women had set a table with sandwiches and fried chicken and lemonade. Dude wished he had his mind on dancing. It was a good night for it. But it wasn't every night a man got a chance at ten grand folding money and Dude aimed to have himself a try at it. A man could spend a lifetime raising cows, wearing blisters on his seat and calluses on his hands and never make anywhere near that kind of money. This was the easy way, and the only way a man could get himself heeled for life as Dude saw it. And the fact that he would have to kill a man to do it didn't bother him any. That was easy, too.

It was just plain fool luck that Dude had been over at the countyseat town, Cochise, this morning and heard that stray puncher from the north country shooting off his mouth about the herd his boss was buying off of old Lafe Renfro. "Ten thousand folding money, he's payin' for it," the puncher had said. "You'd think these Texas cows had gold in their hooves, the way the price has jacked up on 'em."

DUDE bought the puncher another drink and pumped him a little and when he left Cochise and headed back for Rimrock he had it all figured out. Old Lafe Renfro wouldn't get back from delivering that herd before the bank closed at Rimrock that afternoon. And the old cuss, grown fat and rich on brokering cattle these past few years, wouldn't be going to the dance tonight either. He never went anywhere unless he could make a buck out of it.

So old Lafe would be home tonight just as soon as he finished his nightcap across the street at the Black Jack. And sometime tonight, when the dance crowd was milling around Dude would slip out and pay old Lafe a visit. The way Dude had it figured, it couldn't miss.

Dad Ty's fiddle gave a final, drawn out wail and the dancers whooped their approval and flocked toward the table. Dude drifted out of the way, nodding and smiling to those he knew. He saw Dan Trimble move up leading a slender, dark-haired girl in her late teens. The girl's eyes still shone with the excitement of the dance and Dude, always keenly observant of the ladies, noted with quick approval the smooth rhythm of the girl's movements.

Dan Trimble saw him then and spoke softly to the girl, then stepped up to Dude. Trimble was a stocky, sun-burned man with a face as lined and seamed as the broken prairie land over which his cattle roamed.

He said, "Glad to see you, Dude. How's the cow business?"

Dude smiled. He'd played up to Trimble since the day he'd moved in on the Rimrock range with his hundred odd head of longhorns and he figured the old cowman regarded him highly. He wanted to keep it that way until he was ready to take Trimble over. He'd have to do that someday, he knew, because he couldn't stomach a man beside whom he felt inferior.

He said pleasantly, "Just tolerable, Mr. Trimble," and noting the girl watching her uncle covertly, he said, "that young lady you were dancing with, if you haven't got your brand on her permanent for the evening, I'd like an introduction." The idea had struck him the minute he laid eyes on old man Trimble and his niece; and it gratified his warped sense of humor that Dan Trimble's niece would provide him the airtight alibi he sought for the job he'd planned this night.

Trimble sighed heavily and said with ill-concealed relief, "Reckon Amy wouldn't object to that, Dude. Fact is the little heifer is about to dance me off'n my feet."

The introduction was brief and to the point and Dude swung the girl out into the crowd to the tune of *Put Your Little Foot*. Her name was Amy Carlisle and this was her first trip West and she thought ranch life awfully dull, but she was having a wonderful time tonight. These things Dude was dimly conscious of her saying, but his mind wasn't on the conversation. Pretty girls were not

a rarity with Dude Selby, but ten grand folding money— Dude was wrapped up in his thoughts.

It was an hour later that the caller announced an intermission. Dude led the girl to a plank bench against the wall and she sat down, fanning herself with a gaily colored handkerchief. Her hair was disarranged from the fast and violent tempo of *Cotton Eyed Joe*, but the flush on her face was not entirely from exertion. Dude knew how to flatter a woman, even when his mind wasn't on it.

Dude thought, *Now's the time. All I need is ten minutes.*

The girl said demurely, "I—I'm having a wonderful time tonight. I hate to think about leaving tomorrow." It was then she dropped the handkerchief.

DUDE stooped swiftly to pick it up. He was on the point of handing it to her rather indifferently, his mind on a more pressing matter, when he saw old Dan Trimble eyeing him. The old cowman, Dude figured, would take kindly to any bit of Western gallantry Dude might show the girl.

Dude asked softly, "May I keep this? Something to remember you by?"

The girl's color heightened. She said, "Yes," in a voice that was only a whisper.

Dude grinned fleetingly. Women were all alike he reckoned. Sentimentalists. Dude knew about women all right. He'd used many a woman to pull himself out of a tight spot. Like the dance-hall girl in South Dakota who swore Dude had been with her the day the stage was held up— and the waitress at the Horned Owl Cafe up in Wichita who gave Dude all her savings to help him set up a saloon he told her he was putting in there. The two hundred had been enough to buy him a seat in a poker game that night, and he'd left town with his winnings to try his hand at the cattle business here at Rimrock.

Dude's mind jerked back to the job he had to do tonight. He said pleasantly, "I'll drop over at the table and bring us back some lemonade."

He left then and lost himself from her view in the crowd around the table, then edged toward a side door. He stood there in the doorway and rolled a smoke, lighted it and inhaled casually. He took one quick glance around, saw no eyes on him, and slipped out.

Lafe Renfro's adobe cabin was directly behind the schoolhouse and barely a hundred yards away. Dude headed toward it, walking swiftly, and finally breaking into a run.

Fifty yards from the cabin he stopped and went to his knees in front of a small patch of weeds. His hand brushed the weeds aside and came out with a thirty-eight Colts which he had planted there earlier in the day. He moved swiftly through the darkness toward the cabin. There was a light inside.

Lafe Renfro was sitting at a rough plank table eating biscuits and beans when Dude opened the door. He looked up quickly at Dude's abrupt entrance, a slightly startled look in his mild blue eyes. Then, seeing Dude standing there, he smiled briefly.

"Come in, Selby," he said. "Glad you dropped over. I been aimin' to pay you a visit and get a look at yore beef crop. Might be you and me can do some business."

Dude moved inside and closed the door. He said softly, "Yeah, Lafe, might be we can. Fact is that's why I'm here." He was grinning now, a thin, mirthless grin.

Something in Dude's bleak humor penetrated Lafe's mind even as Dude went for his gun. The cattle broker shoved back his chair and lunged for the Winchester leaning up a far corner. Dude let him get his hands on it, let him turn half way around, then he squeezed off a single shot that took Lafe high in the left side, blasting the life out of him before he hit the floor.

DUDE moved fast then. He leaned over Lafe's lifeless body and jerked open the dead man's shirt. He ripped the money belt from the dead man's waist, then took the lamp off the table, broke the glass chimney and pulling some covers off the bed, he tossed the flaming lamp into them. The cabin was adobe and wouldn't burn,

but the flames would attract attention. But not for about ten or fifteen minutes. Not until he was back at the dance squiring Amy Carlisle around the floor. Dude grinned. He'd handled the thing pretty good.

The fiddlers were just getting back to their seats when Dude walked up to Amy Carlisle with a glass of lemonade in each hand. He smiled at her. "Bumped into a fellow who wanted to talk cows," he said easily. "Reckon we'll have to drink this in a hurry if we aim to catch the next dance."

It was twenty minutes and several dances later when Sheriff Waldo Webb walked in. He was a lean slab of a man with a rep for being tough on outlaws. He walked up to the makeshift platform where the string band was playing and the music stopped. Dude edged himself and the girl toward the front so he could hear everything that went on.

"Folks," the sheriff said curtly, "hate to interrupt the fun, but I need a couple of men. Some skunk has just shot old Lafe Renfro to death." He looked over the crowd quickly and his eyes settled on two lanky, brown-faced cowboys standing to the left of Dude.

"Charley," the sheriff said, "you and Pete come along with me. Maybe you two cougar hunters can pick up some sign I missed."

The two cowhands nodded and moved out of the crowd toward the door. Dude breathed easier. At least the lawman hadn't found anything yet. Dude didn't figure he would either, and besides, Amy Carlisle would say he'd been right here at the dance with her all night. So would old Dan Trimble. The Boyd brothers, Charley and Pete, worried him some though. Dude had heard stories about how the Boyds could track.

Dan Trimble moved up to the sheriff. He said, "I'll be at the hotel all night, Webb. Seein' Amy off on the stage in the morning. If you want a posse you can drop by."

The lawman nodded and moved out the door with the Boyd brothers behind him.

The dance slowed down after the lawman left. Couples started drifting out the door, their spirits dampened by news of the killing. Dan Trimble took Amy by the arm just as she and Dude were finishing a dance.

"Your stage leaves at six in the mornin', Amy. Reckon you better get some sleep." He looked at Dude. "You stayin' in town?"

Dude shook his head. "I figured to go on to the ranch."

Trimble nodded. "If we want you for a posse we'll send someone out. Goodnight."

Dude nodded his goodnight, smiled at the girl and moved up to the counter for his hat and gun. He fished in his vest pocket for the gun check and failing to find it, rammed both hands deep in the pockets of his pants. It wasn't there either. A sickly color spread over his face. He turned his pockets wrong side out, spilling money and tobacco on the floor.

Old Tom Snipes looked at him queerly. "You sick or somethin', Dude?"

Dude glared at him. "No," he said roughly, "I ain't sick. I can't find that damn gun check."

THE OLDSTER shrugged, and reached for Dude's gun in the fancy white leather holster. He said, "I reckon I'd know your gun without the check. Let's see, your number was twenty-nine. I'll put this counter check away. Can't use it without the other one."

Cold sweat broke out on Dude's face. If that gun check had been dropped in Renfro's cabin he was as good as hung right now. He turned back toward the dance floor, trying to spot it, but there were still several couples on the floor and he didn't have a chance.

He walked back to the counter and eyed old Tom Snipes. He said, "You sure you gave me that gun check?" His voice was rough, shaky with anger.

The oldster shrugged. "I gave it to you all right, but hell, what's a gun check. We got plenty. Forget it, Dude."

Dude turned and moved off, his mind clouded with doubt. He wished he could

forget it. But a man can't forget that his neck's in a noose. His palms were moist and clammy. He wiped them on his pants and walked outside.

He thought fleetingly about risking a search of Renfro's cabin. He was pretty sure he'd dropped it there after thinking it over. Maybe it had slid from his shirt pocket when he'd leaned over to take the money belt off of Lafe. Or maybe when he stooped down to set fire to the covers. Hell, it could have happened like that all right. Then he saw the dim glow of a kerosene lantern outside Renfro's cabin and he knew that the sheriff or one of the Boyds was still looking around.

He moved off toward the saloon in a daze, feeling the need of a drink to set his mind to working. He moved up to the bar and bought a drink, and then he bought another, and when they didn't reach down to the cold emptiness inside him, he bought a bottle and headed for the hotel. He had to stick around. Had to find out about that gun check. He couldn't just saddle up and ride off leaving a ranch and a hundred head of cattle without he knew for sure that they were on to him.

Trouble was that by the time he knew for sure it might be too late to ride. This thought shook him and he opened the bottle and took a long pull. By the time he got to a room in the hotel he was feeling the whiskey. He took another drink, patted the money belt around his waist to make sure he still had it, then lay down on the bed to think.

Someone pounding on the door woke him up. He came off the bed logger-headed and reaching for his gun. He yelled, "Who is it?" and his voice broke with the strain that gripped him.

The pounding on the door stopped. Someone in the hall said, "It's Charley Boyd. The sheriff wants you down at his office right away."

Dude shot a quick look toward the window. Early dawn hung like a gray shroud over the street. A few early risers were moving along the boardwalks. Not a chance to slip out that way without being spotted. Dude took a deep breath, eared back the hammer on his gun and started for the door.

He said, "I'm comin', Charley."

And even as he spoke he flung open the door and snapped a fast shot at the lanky cowhand standing there. But the whiskey and strain of last night had spooked him, so that the shot went wild and Charley Boyd, a look of bewilderment on his face, threw himself to the floor, drawing as he fell. His shot caught Dude square in the middle and buckled him. Dude let out a long sigh and fell on his face.

Down at the sheriff's office Charley Boyd was saying, "He was crazy drunk, Webb. When the clerk told me he stayed the night there I dropped by to get him for the posse along with Dan Trimble. He came out shooting. Just plain loco drunk.

Down the street Amy Carlisle settled back inside the stage, glad that she was leaving this wild and primitive country. The killing last night had scared her, and this morning she'd heard more shooting just as she was getting on the stage. The shots had come from the hotel where she had spent the night.

She thought about Dude Selby and blushed, feeling a little needle of shame that she had let him keep her handkerchief. But she'd probably never see him again anyway, so it wouldn't hurt anything. Besides, it had been kind of an exchange of mementos. When he had leaned over her to pick up the handkerchief that little blue circle of metal had fallen from his shirt pocket right into her lap.

She touched the ribbon around her neck, then lifted it and looked at the gun check with the number twenty-nine stamped on it. It would lend color to her story when she told the girls back home about the cowboy dance. And he would never miss it.

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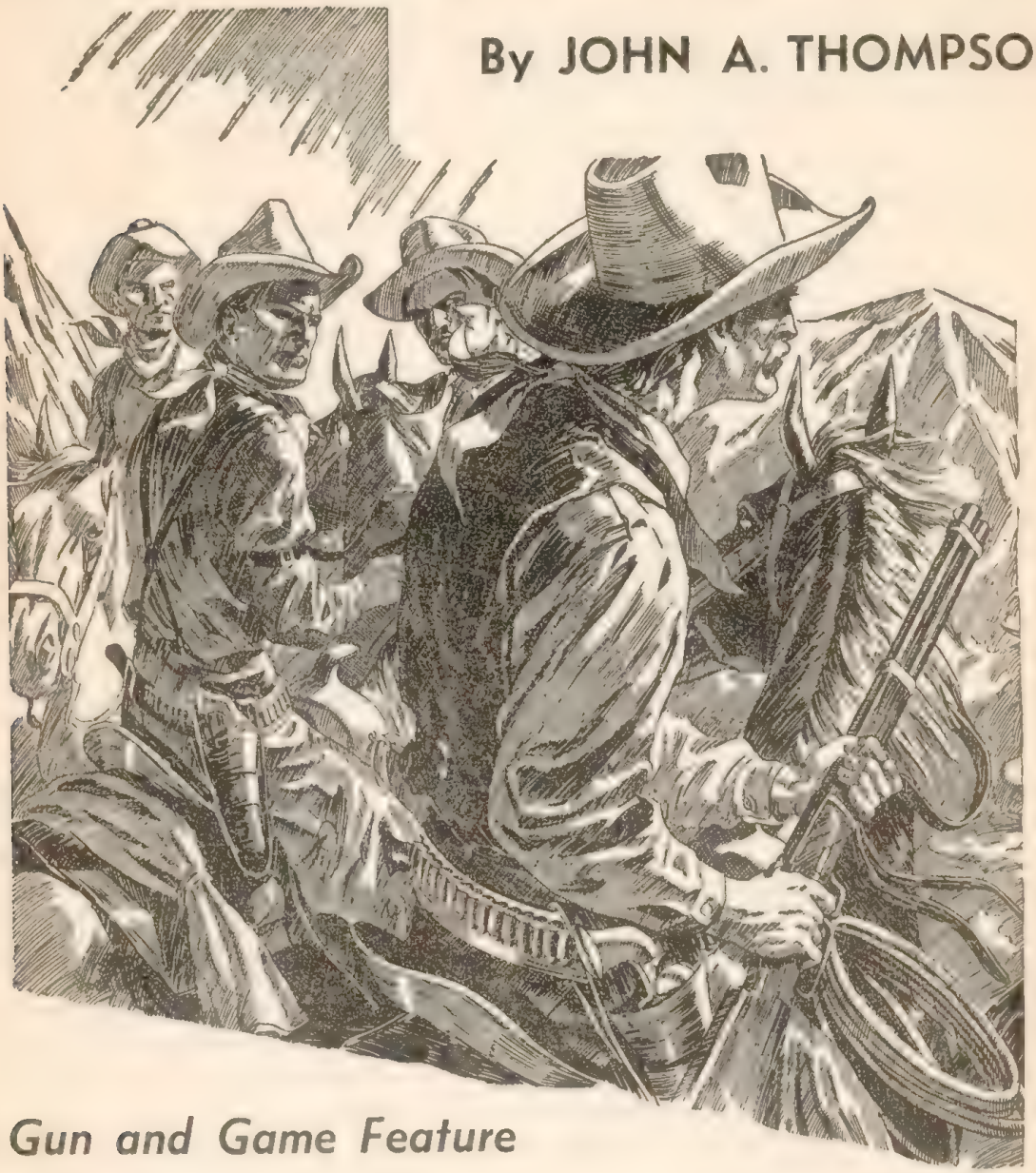
Next Issue: ZORRO'S FIGHT FOR LIFE, a Novel of the Swashbuckling Californio by Johnston McCulley — Plus Many Other Stories!

Slings, Scopes and Loads

By JOHN A. THOMPSON



A Gun and Game Feature

IN THE last article we discussed some aspects of long distance big-game shooting. Here are a few tips on the best equipment for bagging the far ones. One of the most important aids to accurate long range rifle fire you can use is a gunsling. A sling won't improve your aim, but it is of tremendous assistance in helping you hold your gun steady.

Unfortunately too many hunters have looked down on slings as an appendage of military shooting, or of target rifle fire. Some hunters seem to think a gunsling is simply a complicated business of leather straps that get in their way. Others, that its primary use is for carrying purposes, and they can well do without it.

Both are wrong to a greater or lesser de-

gree depending on the sort of hunting they are doing and the country they are hunting in. The forest deer hunter, alert for a quick, short range offhand shot at a buck can get along without a sling. So can a man in a canoe searching the edge of a wilderness waterway for a sudden chance at a wading moose. The man on horseback with a short-barreled carbine can also dispense with a sling.

For Long Range Shots

But the man who does much walking in rugged canyon, or high mountain country that entails real scrambling and perhaps handholds on rocky ledges will find a sling useful as a carrying device, and doubly bless it when it comes to the long range shots he is most likely to have to make.

Proof that the sling is coming into its own as a hunting adjunct rather than a purely military gimmick lies in the increasing number of first class sporting rifles that come factory equipped with swivels, and in some cases, slings.

In taking advantage of a gunsling as a shooting aid as well as a carrying agent there are two main things to remember concerning the adjustment of the sling. One: if the loop, that is the upper part of the sling that is slipped over your arm, is too short you won't be able to bring your rifle up to your shoulder properly. Two: if the loop is too long the sling will be loose and not have the correct tightness on your arm. A well adjusted gunsling should hold the rifle steady with virtually no holding effort on the part of the right hand.

A Common Error

An error hunters unused to slings often fall into is the tendency to fit the rear of the loop too low on the upper arm. They wear it down too close to the left elbow instead of up almost at the armpit where it belongs.

And this is important, especially to the hunter. Once the loop on your gunsling is adjusted properly for your left arm, *leave it that way.* Trying a rough, hurried adjustment when you are ready to shoot and seconds count will give you no more accuracy than no sling at all and may actually handicap your normal non-sling shooting.

Of course, some game and some game shots simply won't allow time to slip into a sling, or for that matter to assume a prone or sitting position either—even if your sling loop has been previously perfectly adjusted.

'Scope Sights

The steadiest position, the best rifle in the world and a gunsling are still not going to enable a hunter to bring down big game at two hundred and fifty, three hundred or three hundred and fifty yards unless he can see clearly what he is aiming at. What with one thing or another in the modern workaday world our eyes, particularly for the more mature, are not what they used to be when it comes to using them in the long distances of the big outdoors.

If you have the sharp eyesight of an old-time frontier plainsman, ignore the next couple of paragraphs. If not, read 'em twice.

'Scope sights are *not* just a fancy-pants accessory for the ultra-ultra big game sportsman. Within little more than the last decade these things on a hunting rifle that used to be considered little more than a gun-bug's fad have become thoroughly practical. They have been used successfully under all sorts of the most difficult big game hunting encountered on the continent. From the Arizona desert to the glacier-dotted peaks of Alaska 'scopes have proved themselves feasible, all-weather sights, and the best possible for shooting big game at ranges and under conditions where iron sights would have been little better than pointing a bare barrel at the target.

Of course, a man with 'scope sights mounted on his favorite hunting rifle doesn't want to bang his gun around too much in handling it. He wouldn't with an

iron sighted rifle either. Iron sights can be bent, broken or otherwise damaged by careless handling too—and often are.

In any event, when it comes to bagging that buck or any other big game animal at long range, no one can shoot better than the keenness of his eyesight. And a good 'scope properly mounted makes anybody's eyesight that much better.

Bullet Weights

Steady shooting positions and 'scope-sighted hunting rifles are two factors that will—or certainly should—increase the hitting ability of long range shots on any hunting trip. A third leg up for the hunter is the load and cartridge he uses. On this score his first consideration should be the load and weight of bullet that gives the flattest trajectory possible.

Having picked on one particular weight and style of bullet and one particular brand of ammunition, then by all means stick to it.

Flirting around with an assorted batch of bullet weights, brands and loads isn't going to improve the precision shooting called for in three hundred and three hundred and fifty yard shots. On the contrary, it is going to wreck it.

Marksmanship Counts Most

Accurate high speed cartridges are an aid in making clean hits. Particularly in long range shooting. But in the last analysis, 'scope sights, steady holding and modern cartridges nothwithstanding, it is the individual's own marksmanship that brings home the game—or misses it.

And good shooting, even good long range big game shooting, is possible for virtually everybody with a fairly good physique, good habits and good eyesight—with or without glasses. That's straight from the horse's mouth.

But like any other worthwhile accomplishment you have to work at it. It won't be handed to you on a silver platter.

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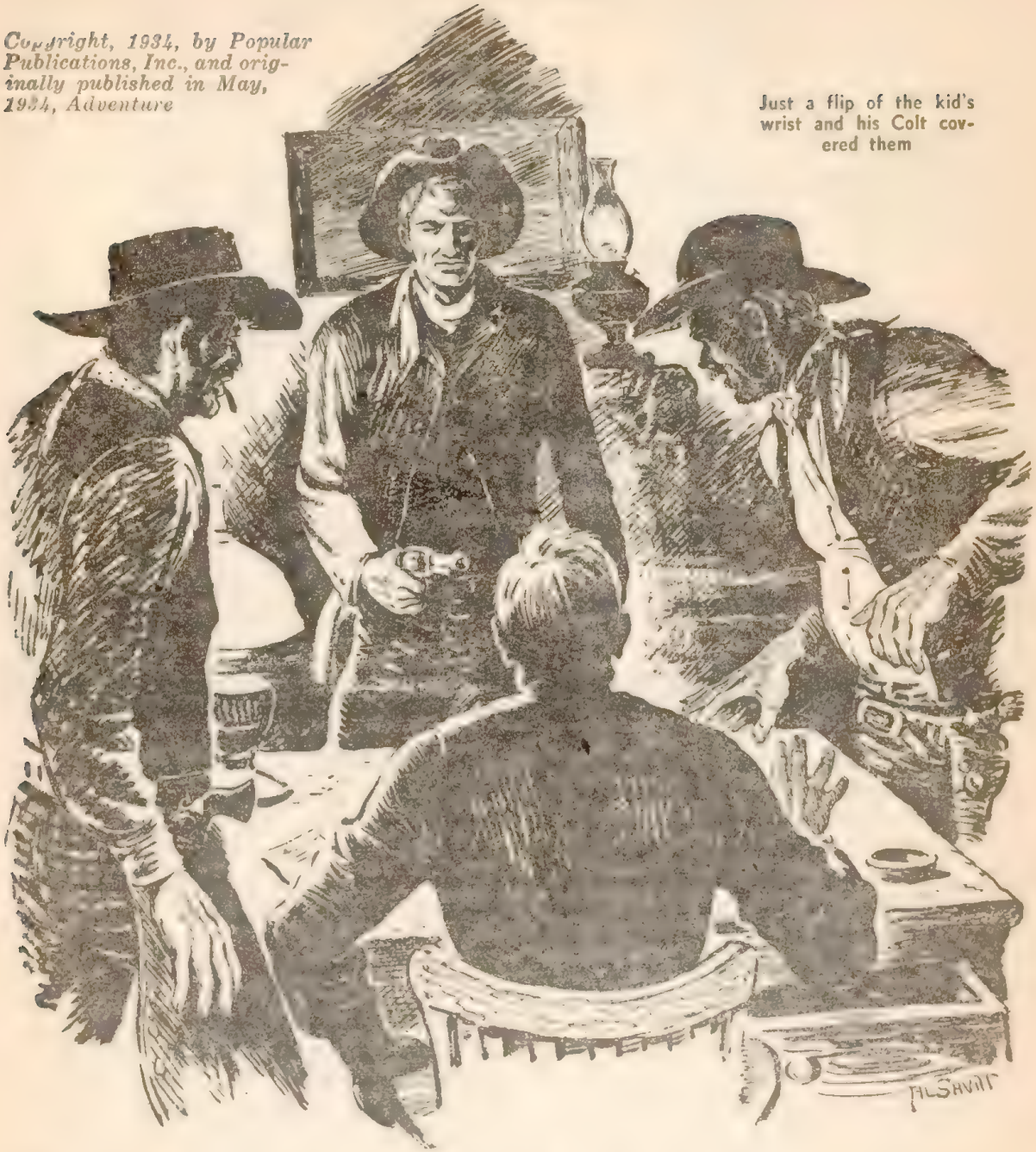


Just a flip of the kid's wrist and his Colt covered them

Turkey Tracks

By W. C. TUTTLE

Gun-Justice rises from the grave to break the gold-town grip of big Dan Belt!

A MAN'S indrawn breath whispered:

"Turkey Track!"

And there he stood facing them, his back against the bar, while streamers of tobacco smoke eddied around him in the

yellow light of the saloon's oil lamps.

Turkey Track! The man whom three of the five at the poker table had to stop at the little settlement of Sunrise. They were drawing a salary to prevent this man from reaching Bonanza City; and this was the first time in a week that at least one of them had not guarded the narrow cut of Sunrise Pass. These were gunmen, but not one of them made a move toward a gun.

They all knew Turkey Track's reputation. True, they might down him; but some of them would go down with him, so swift and deadly was his draw. There was no question as to his indentity. They were the first to look upon his features; but there were the black shirt, black sombrero, black batwing chaps on which, stamped in glistening silver rivets, was the insignia of the Turkey Track brand—the trade-mark of a cold blooded killer—to mark him.

None of Turkey Track's victims had ever seen the face of this young outlaw. He had always been heavily masked and dressed in black. Who he was, no one knew, but they watched for the rider in black, who wore these clothes.

Only a kid, this sinister figure. His nose was thin and pinched, his cheeks hollow, and his lips merely a thin line above a pointed chin.

"Where does your sheriff hang out?" asked the kid.

The five men shifted their eyes to look at one another. The Turkey Track Kid asking for the sheriff! One of the men swallowed painfully as he managed to inquire.

"Wh-what do you want him for?"

The kid looked at them intently. His voice was pitched low as he replied:

"I killed a man today. It was back yonder in the hills. My horse busted his leg and I had to shoot him. Then I found this here cabin and went up to the door. I shoved it open. There was a feller in there and he tried to throw down on me.

"I dunno who he was. He had a horse and saddle, so I took 'em. And I borrowed his chaps and gun. You see I've got to explain it to the sheriff, because it was self-defense; and I don't want a posse houndin' me around."

THE FIVE men relaxed. One of them signaled a warning to the others and turned to the kid.

"Where'd this all happen, stranger?" he asked.

The young man was rather vague in directions, but his description was clear.

"The old Marsh place," said one, and the others nodded.

"What did he look like?" asked the freighter. "Old feller?"

"No, he wasn't old. Mebbe he's no older than me."

"And he tried to throw down on you?"

"Yeah. Tried to—like I told you."

"Well," said the freighter, "I wouldn't worry about seein' the sheriff. If you ain't lyin', you've killed the worst killer in the country."

"You don't mean that, do you?" queried the youngster.

"Look at the brand on them chaps. Don't that mean nothin' to you?"

"Nothin' but some silver rivets."

"You ain't never heard of the Turkey Track?"

The kid looked a little puzzled. "Well you see, mister—"

"You're kind of new in this country, ain't you?" asked the freighter.

"I just got in here. Ain't this the road to Bonanza? Well, I've got a letter to a feller named Dan Belt."

"You have, eh? Well, that's fine—and funny."

"Funny?"

"Listen, young feller; you've wiped out the one man in the world that Dan Belt didn't want in Bonanza. Dan's men are strung all over this country, watchin' for the man you killed. Three of us are here guardin' the Pass—or supposed to be guardin' it. Dan's men in Bonanza are watchin', in case he slipped through.

"Why, there's a reward of five thousand dollars for Turkey Track; and you, just a damn wet-behind-the-ears kid, comes along and gets it. But you can't ride to

Bonanza in them clothes. You'd be killed before you could prove anythin'. We'll fix you up with other stuff."

"I wasn't shootin' for no reward," said the kid. He hesitated a moment.

Dan Belt, the man who was supposed to be protected from Turkey Track, was the brains of the crooked element of Bonanza City. He owned the liquor, gambling and honkytonk business. He bought high grade gold ore from crooked miners, owned the freight business and the stage lines.

"I've got a letter to him," repeated the kid.

"You have, eh?" said Taylor.

"Yeah."

"That's fine. Well, let's drink, boys; and then we'll dig up a new outfit for our friend."

At about this same time, seated in his little office in the Pay Streak Saloon, Dan Belt perused his last letter from Turkey Track. It read:

Dan Belt:
The Turkey Track is collectin'. He wants the twenty thousind you got for Jim Hassler's mine and then he's goin' to kill you just like you killed Jim.

Yrs respy
—TURKEY TRACK

Dan Belt looked grimly at the penciled scrawl. Belt had no morals or conscience; but he did have a yellow streak. He had killed Jim Hassler. What resembled an accident explosion of dynamite in Hassler's cabin had been caused by Belt after he had stolen a location notice which Hassler had planned to record the next day.

Later he had located it through one of his own men and sold it for twenty thousand dollars. And this wild devil of a Turkey Track claimed Jim Hassler was his uncle. That was why Belt kept himself surrounded by his own men, and the roads were guarded. He promised a thousand dollars in gold to the man who got Turkey Track.

Belt was a big powerful man, handsome in a swarthy way. His eyes were quick to flash with anger.

A PECULIAR condition existed in Bonanza City—a deadline between the mining section and the so-called amusement section. It was a ravine known as The Gut. South of this ravine were the mines and the homes where no dives of any kind were allowed. There Jack Sheedy was the boss. He owned the Rainbow mine, the largest producer, and was head of the Miners' Committee which had delivered the deadline ultimatum to Belt.

The ultimatum contained this paragraph:

If anything of a violent nature, caused by men, happens to Jack Sheedy or to any other individual of this committee, every person and establishment will be wiped off the North Side of Bonanza City.

Dan Belt knew that this was no idle statement. The mining element outnumbered the gamblers ten to one; and the miners loved Sheedy.

Higrading miners acted as a source of information for Belt; most of the payrolls came over Belt's bars and green covered tables.

Dan Belt sat back and lighted a fresh cigar. Some one knocked softly on the door; and at Belt's grunting reply the door opened and one of his most trusted men came in.

"There's a young feller out at the bar, Dan," the man said softly. "He's plenty hard lookin', and the boys are close herdin' him. Says he's got a letter to you."

Belt scowled thoughtfully for several moments.

Then he laughed, remembering another letter in his pocket. He glanced at it for a moment.

"Bring him in, Slug," he said.

It was the boy who had worn the chaps of Turkey Track, but now he was wearing an old pair. Belt looked him over keenly.

"You got a letter to me?" he asked.

The boy handed him a dirty envelope. Belt quickly opened it and drew out a blank sheet of paper. He looked at it and held it out to the kid.

"How'd I know what was in it?" asked the kid defiantly.

Dan Belt laughed. "It's your credentials, Link. So you're a fast gunman, eh? Pretty young, it seems to me."

"I'm old enough to suit me," replied the youngster, as one of the men who had been at Sunrise Pass entered the room.

"I don't like the way you talk, feller," said Belt coldly.

With an almost imperceptible motion of his right arm the kid drew and cocked his heavy Colt, tensing it against his hip. Just a flick of his wrist, and the men in the room were covered.

"I talk my own way," said the kid coldly. "Take it or leave it."

"Wait a minute," said the man from Sunrise Pass. "Dan, this kid killed Turkey Track last night. We brought him out from the old Marsh place and shipped him out to the sheriff."

Dan Belt stared in amazement at the lad. "You killed Turkey Track?" he gasped. "You?"

"I didn't name him," replied the kid coldly. "All I know is that he tried to throw down on me."

Belt drew a deep breath of thanksgiving.

"Put up that gun, Link," he said. "Slug, fix him up with a room."

After they left, Dan Belt reread that other letter.

Dear Dan:
I'm sending you a gun-fighting kid named Eddie Link, wanted for a couple killings. No brains, no conscience, and he needs a hideout. His letter of introduction is a blank.
Sincerely
J. S.

"Fast as a flash. And he killed Turkey Track," muttered Belt.

Then he went out to the bar and bought drinks for the house. For the first time in weeks Dan Belt was not afraid.

Old Jimmy McCree, who drove one of Belt's stages, came into the Pay Streak in answer to a summons from Belt, who met him and took the old man back to his office.

"Listen to me, McCree," said Belt bluntly. "Stop Nora from goin' across the Gut."

JIMMY McCREE looked blankly at Belt. "I didn't know—"

"Don't try to prove any alibi, McCree. Keep her on this side."

"I don't see the hurt in her goin' over there, Dan."

"You don't, eh?" Belt said. "I'll tell you somethin'; she was seen talkin' with Jack Sheedy."

"She's knowed him a long time," said the old man slowly.

"I don't give a damn about that McCree. I've played fair with you and with her. I've asked her to marry me."

"She told me," McCree said.

"She did, eh?" said Belt. "What else did she say?"

"That she wouldn't marry you. She has a will of her own."

"Listen to me, McCree: I've tolerated you and paid you good money. Not because you're a good driver, not because I need you—but because I want that girl. That's flat. You'll either help me out in this or you'll go down the road—alone."

"Alone?"

"Nora stays here," snarled Belt.

A hot retort flared in McCree's throat, but he swallowed it. He knew the power of Belt's ruthless organization.

"I'll do me best," he said.

After the old man left the office, Belt sent for Eddie Link. The gun-fighting kid sauntered in and Belt snapped at him:

"When I send for a man I expect him to come fast."

"Yeah?" drawled Link. "Keep expectin'." He looked at the other man.

"You're workin' for me, and don't forget that." Link's laugh netted Belt. "Anything funny about it?" he asked.

"I'll tell you, Dan," Link replied easily. "I've always heard that you was a big he-buzzard of a feller, until I got here and heard tell how you lost all your nerve over a feller they called Turkey Track. He's dead now, and your nerve is back.

Even when you had about twenty hired killers out watchin' for him you kept out of sight. Yeah, you're a wolf, you are."

"Let me tell you somethin'," snarled Belt. "I'm boss here. You killed Turkey Track and you'll get the reward. But that don't give you the right to cross me."

"I'm not tryin' to cross you, Dan. I'll take your orders, but I'll not take your lip. A man has got to be better than I am to make me take nasty talk. What didja want, anyway?"

"You don't know anybody on the South Side of town, do you?"

"No."

"Do you know who Nora McCree is?"

"I've seen her." Link nodded. "Go ahead."

"Your job is to follow her and see where she goes."

"Follow a girl? What the hell kind of a job is that?"

"You're not here to ask questions, Link."

"She's a mighty pretty girl, Dan."

"She's goin' to be my wife."

The kid looked keenly at Belt for several minutes.

"Yeah?" he drawled.

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Belt. "Don't you believe it?"

"When I see it."

"Listen to me, Link; when I give a man an order I expect him to follow it out. They either do that, or they don't last long in Bonanza City. And I don't stand for my men talkin' back to me."

"That's why," replied the kid.

"Why—what?"

"Why you've got such a danged mangy bunch around you, Belt. Why, I wouldn't trust one of 'em as far as I could stretch your ears."

Belt tried to stifle his anger, to keep his hands off this thin faced youngster who presumed to advise him, who intimated that he was lacking in nerve. And the fellow was laughing at him.

"You better go," said Belt huskily.

"All right. You set down and cool off, Belt. You're too fat to get upset thataway. You might bring on a stroke."

THE kid cocked his hat on one side of his head and walked through the saloon. Belt's men looked curiously at him, wondering what sort of assignment Belt had given him. Link knew where Jimmy McCree and Nora lived. The men had told him that Nora was Belt's girl, and the "hands-off" order had gone out to the men on that side of the Gut.

On the other side of the street Link met Duke Akers, marshal of Bonanza City. Duke as cold-blooded as a snake, and in the pay of Dan Belt.

"Hyah, Officer," said Link pleasantly.

Duke merely grunted and went across toward the Pay Streak. Link walked down to the stage stable, went through the building, circled around the back and in a few minutes he reached Jimmy McCree's little house. Nora was sweeping the back porch, but stopped to look curiously at Eddie Link.

Nora McCree was the prettiest girl in Bonanza City—brunette, Irish, with big serious eyes and a laughing mouth. But she was not laughing as she leaned on the broom and looked at Eddie Link.

"You see," explained Eddie seriously, "I've been hired to spy on you, ma'am; so I thought I'd better start keepin' an eye on you."

"Hired to spy on me?" queried Nora softly. "I don't understand."

"Hired by Dan Belt. You see, as long as he's goin' to marry you, he's goin' to see where you go and what you do."

"Who says I'm going to marry Dan Belt?"

"He does."

"Well!" Nora straightened up, her dark eyes flashing. "Mister Spy, you can go back to Dan Belt and tell him—"

"I can't go back," interrupted Link. "I'd lose my job."

"Oh, you would, would you? What's that to me?"

"This much," replied Link. "He might hire another man to spy on you, and I wouldn't trust another one of his men."

"Do you think I trust you?" she asked.

Link grinned. "Anyway you'll know who's followin' you."

"But why should you follow me? This is a free country."

"Well, Nora, do you know, I forgot to ask Belt what I was supposed to report. He told me to follow you and tell him where you went. Ma'am, I ain't goin' to do that. Not even if I was sure you was goin' to marry him. But if I don't act like I was spyin' on you, he'll take me off the job and put some man who *will.*"

"What does he expect his spies to see me doing?" she demanded angrily.

"Well," drawled Link, "for one thing he wouldn't expect to see you meetin' Steve Arden across the—across the ravine."

Nora flushed quickly, gripping the broom with both hands.

"You see," continued Link, "Steve is his top-hand gambler, and he'd have Steve killed just as sure."

Nora stared at Link. "You knew this?" she whispered. "Who—who told you?"

"I saw you."

"You spied on me last night?"

"No, ma'am. Dan Belt told me to keep away from the South Side: so I went over there. I know Steve, and I'd saw you."

"Dan Belt doesn't know this?" she asked anxiously.

"No. You see, I wasn't his spy until today."

The girl stared at him dumbly, wonderingly. She had always been afraid of Dan Belt. Steve had told her that Belt would kill him if he knew they loved each other. And this queer sort of spy for Dan Belt knew that she had met Steve Arden.

"I—I don't believe I understand you," she said weakly.

Link laughed softly. He did not blame Dan Belt for coveting this beautiful girl. Link knew Steve Arden—a young, handsome gambler, who had the reputation of dealing a square game, even for Belt.

"You don't love Dan Belt, do you?" he asked.

"No! Why should I love him?"

"I dunno. But you do love Steve Arden."

Nora flushed quickly. "We'll not discuss that," she replied.

"You see," confided Link, "your father was in Belt's office today. Belt sent for him; and I reckon the talk was about you, because your father looked kind of sick when he came out."

NORA turned away, but not before Link had noticed the misery in her big eyes. He continued:

"I'm kind of new here but I've figured out things. Belt owns everythin' on wheels and four legs. He knows who comes in and goes out, and if he didn't want anybody to leave town they'd have to walk out, I reckon. Of course, your father could hop his stage at the other end of the line, but you'd still be here."

Nora nodded. "I'm watched all the time," she said.

"I'm doin' the watchin' for now," said Link. "Of course I'm not watchin' the stages for him. But wasn't you and Steve at Jack Sheedy's house night before last?"

Nora looked helplessly at him. "You know that Dan Belt and Jack Sheedy are bitter enemies, don't you?" she asked.

"Oh, sure."

"Are you going to tell Dan Belt?"

"Nope. You see, I just started on the spying job today."

Nora shook her head, a bit bewildered by this thin faced boy.

"Why should you come and tell me all this?" she asked.

"I just want you to know where I stand, and to warn you. Belt is no fool. Chances are he's got men watchin' me too. In fact, I don't believe he trusts anybody; so he's prob'ly got a spy to watch every spy he's got. So long—and be careful."

She watched him walk away with the peculiar stiff-legged gait of a man who wears high heeled boots, his elbows bent and held close to his sides.

The news had reached Bonanza City that the passing of Turkey Track had been confirmed in Wrangle, the county seat, and the body had been buried. Dan Belt, half drunk, was buying drinks for everybody.

Eddie Link went to the saloon, where

Belt told him the news.

"You'll get the reward, Link," he said. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worryin' about gettin' what's mine," replied Link.

Link wandered about the place for awhile, looking for Steve Arden who was off shift at the time. Finally he went upstairs where Steve had a room above the saloon. Steve was lying on his bed, reading a book, when the young gunman opened the door. The gambler sat up quickly and swung his feet off the bed.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Link eyed him closely as he closed the door. Downstairs there was much noise. The kid grinned.

"Belt is celebratin'," said Link, ignoring the question.

"I suppose he's got a load off his mind," replied Steve.

"He's yellow," said the kid.

"Dan Belt—yellow?"

"Hires guns, don't he?" queried the kid scratching his head.

"Does that make him yellow?"

"To my way of thinkin'," replied the kid.

"You ought to tell him that, Link."

"I have."

"Why tell me this?" asked Steve curiously.

"Just to show you what I think of the man who thinks he's boss."

"I'm one of his men," said Steve seriously.

The kid snorted. "In a pig's valise, you are!"

Arden leaned forward, looking intently at the thin faced kid. "You might explain that remark," said Arden coldly.

"I was over on the South Side night before last," said Link.

Arden had a perfect poker face. He affected a yawn, got slowly to his feet and stepped over to where his coat was hanging on a nail. As he reached into a side pocket Link sprang swiftly in behind him, jamming the muzzle of his gun into Arden's side.

"Easy, pardner," he whispered. "Hand away from that pocket."

And as Arden drew aside, Link explored the pocket and removed a Derringer. He put it in his pocket and went back to the chair.

"Sit down, Arden," he said. "Me and you are goin' to have a talk."

STEVE ARDEN sat down, looking anxiously at Link. "I'm Belt's hired spy," said Link. "He hired me to spy on Miss McCree."

Arden looked grimly at Link, his hands clenched on the blanket.

"Did Belt send you up to see me?" he asked.

"I told you I was hired to spy on Miss McCree. What do you reckon would happen to you if Belt knew you and she met at Jack Sheedy's house?"

Steve Arden shook his head. "I can guess."

Link drew the edge of his hand across his throat.

Steve turned his head away, his jaw muscles bulging a little.

"Why don't you take the girl and get to hell out of here?" asked Link savagely. "Ain't you man enough to shoot your way out?"

"Against two dozen?" asked Steve.

"I would, if she was my girl," said the thin faced kid a bit wistfully. "I'd kill every damn man who got in my road."

"Yes?" queried Arden. "Were you ever in love?"

"Me?" Link laughed and shook his head, but sobered quickly. "At least nobody ever knowed it, if I was. But if I ever was, and a big yellow belly like Dan Belt tried to bust up my play—well, it wouldn't set so good with me."

"And you're the man Dan Belt trusted as a spy. What would he do if he could hear what you're telling me?"

"Get himself killed, I reckon," drawled Link.

"Dan Belt don't have to do his own killing."

"No; but he'll have to do his own dyin', and he damn well knows it. He'll probably have more nerve now since that Turkey Track person is out of the way. What

was the trouble between him and Turkey Track?"

"I never did hear," replied Arden.

"I reckon I'll have to ask Belt."

"The question is—what are you going to tell Belt about me?"

"I wasn't hired to spy on you, Arden."

"Then what are you going to tell him about Nora McCree?"

"I ain't made up my mind yet. But you keep away from the other side of The Gut, Arden. I'm not the only spy workin' for Belt."

Link got to his feet and went to the door. With a flip of his wrist he tossed the Derringer to the bed.

"*Adios,*" he said softly and closed the door.

From the balcony he saw Dan Belt and Duke Akers together on the main floor. He slipped down among the crowd, and Belt found him watching a roulette game.

"Want to talk to you," said Belt. Link followed to Belt's office.

"You know who Akers is," said Belt huskily.

He had drunk an unusual amount of liquor, but carried it well.

"Yeah, I know," replied Link indifferently.

"Akers, bein' the marshal, works both sides of The Gut," said Belt. "You know who Steve Arden is, don't you, Link?"

"That handsome gambler?"

"That's Steve." Belt's eyes hardened and his huge hands gripped the edge of his desk. "Steve was across to the South Side night before last," he said.

Link's thin lips twisted sarcastically.

"Anythin' criminal about that?"

"Nora McCree was over there too—same night."

"Yeah?"

"At Jack Sheedy's house!"

BELT spat the words as if they tasted bitter.

"How did you find it out at this stage of the game?" asked Link.

"Akers found it out."

"Somebody squealed, eh?" said Link. "Well?"

"I've got to be sure," said Belt. "And when I'm sure—"

"You'll turn the job over to a hired killer," finished Link. "Well, what can I do about it? Why tell all this stuff to me?"

"Because I want you to watch Arden and the girl. Old Jimmy McCree has always been a friend of Sheedy's, damn him! By heaven, I'll get Arden and Sheedy both."

"I'd let Sheedy alone," advised the lanky marshal. "You can't afford to kill him, Dan—not unless you can figure out a scheme where your skirts will be clean. That bunch over there wouldn't stop at anythin'. Nobody's goin' to complain if you kill Arden. One gambler more or less won't make no difference; but I'd draw the line at Sheedy."

Belt struck his clenched fist on the desktop. "I'd give five thousand dollars for a scheme to put Sheedy out of the way and keep the North Side out of it."

"That's a lot of money," said Link. "You're such a big man and so damn smart, why don't you figure out one, and save the money?"

Belt glared at Link, who grinned crookedly at him. Duke Akers looked curiously at Link, probably wondering at the nerve of the kid talking like that to Dan Belt.

"You've got your orders, Link," said Belt huskily. "Bring me some news in the mornin'."

"I'll bring you news when I've got some," replied Link, and went out.

"The dirty little snipe!" snorted Duke Akers. "I'd slap his chops if he talked thataway to me, Dan."

"And go to hell on the end of a hot bullet," retorted Belt. "That kid is poison with a gun, Duke. I don't believe he cares who he shoots."

"Well," said the marshal, "he—he ought to make you a good man, Dan."

Belt nodded thoughtfully.

"He'll do—until I don't need him."

Duke Akers left the office. A little later, as Belt was coming out, Link came back and met him at the doorway. He looked at Belt good naturedly.

"Was you serious about that five thousand dollars?" asked Link.

"Yeah, why?" grunted Belt.

"Let's go inside and talk about it, Belt."

With the door locked behind them Link leaned across the desk.

"How far would you go, Belt?" he queried seriously.

"The limit," said Belt.

"To get Sheedy and Arden—cold?"

"How?" asked Belt eagerly.

"Suppose Arden killed Sheedy. They—that South Side gang—would lynch Arden, wouldn't they?"

"Too damn quick! But how'd you git Arden to shoot him?"

"Suppose it looked like Arden killed him!"

"That sounds like somethin'," said Belt. "But it couldn't happen on this side of The Gut, Link."

"It would happen right in Sheedy's house. A quarrel over that girl." Link's eyes sparkled with inspiration. "Have that long legged marshal right handy; grab Arden, jerk him over to jail on this side and pass the word over there that he shot Sheedy."

"By gad, I believe it could be worked! There's only one chance for a slip. Suppose Arden was able to convince them that he didn't shoot Sheedy. It might blow back, Link. How can we dispose of Arden?"

"Have him all lynched before the South Side gang get here," replied Link callously.

"Wait a minute," said Belt. "There's too many chances of a slip in that lynchin'. Here's somethin' better. Have some of my men planted here handy. At a signal they run toward the jail, shootin'. We'll say they was called to help the marshal protect his prisoner. But somebody beats us to it and dynamites the jail. Hell, we need a new jail. The South Siders sure can't squawk about us killin' off one of my best men. We'll blame 'em for it and raise hell."

"Well, that might work," admitted Link. "We'll see."

"If you're goin' out, see if you can find Duke Akers and send him in to me."

"You ain't goin' to tell this to that sandhill crane, are you?"

"Why not?" demanded Belt.

"Because a secret ain't a secret when three men know it. We might have to wait quite awhile to pull this deal, Belt, and we don't want too many minds thinkin' it over."

"Are you scared I'll beat you out of that money, Link?"

"Not if I'm alive, you won't, Belt."

"You're a pretty cocky kid, Link."

"I take what's comin' to me, Belt; and when I say I'll do a thing, I do it. Roll that up in a cowhide and smoke it."

Belt laughed at him, and the kid screwed up his face thoughtfully.

"I'm wonderin' if you've got five thousand dollars," he said.

Belt glanced at the heavy safe in the corner of his office.

"Don't let that worry you," he replied. "I could buy your carcass if it was worth its weight in gold, and have money enough left to buy and throw away several more like you."

"I wonder if I'll ever be rich?" mused Link wistfully.

"If all you needed was gall, you'd be a millionaire."

"Well, I've still got some brains." Link grinned. "And you'll pay me for the use of 'em, Belt. *Adios.*"

FOR three days Eddie Link made no report to Dan Belt, except to say that he was strictly on the job. It was late in the afternoon of the fourth day when Link came to Dan Belt. He looked tired and drawn, but triumphant.

"Sheedy met Nora McCree in The Gut this afternoon," said Link. "I got in close enough to hear what was said. Tonight at eight Arden and the girl meet at Sheedy's house."

"Yeah?" queried Belt. "Steve Arden is on shift at that time."

"He'll have a bad headache," said Link.

"He will, eh? You're damn right he will!"

"Don't be a fool, Belt! Let him off if he

asks for it."

"All right. Damn him, I'd like to smash his teeth down his dirty throat! I'll get Duke in here and let him in on it."

"Three of us is enough," said Link. "I'll shoot Sheedy, but you'll have to wipe out Arden, because I won't be here in time. You'll have to get the dynamite and all that stuff and do the work." He nodded wisely.

"Where'll you be?" asked Belt.

"I'll be lettin' the South Side know what happened, while Duke brings his prisoner across The Gut. We better arrange for Duke to give the signal to touch off the blast as soon as some of 'em show up."

"I wish I could be out of town when this happens," said Belt.

Link looked disgustedly at him. "Why not?" he said, "Take that seven o'clock stage. He's your driver. Pack up a valise and tell the folks you're goin' away for a few days. Get on the stage, ride out far enough to hide the outfit and come back. Hold the stage there until this is over, and then beat it back to the stage. If there ain't no passengers, it'll be a cinch."

"I can see that there ain't no passengers," said Belt. "That's just what I'll do. Will you help me with the dynamite? We can run wires over to that old bunkhouse building', and I can pull 'em loose before I go back to the stage."

"All right." Link nodded. "We'll send Duke over to watch Sheedy's house. It won't take me long to get over there. I'll go and find Duke so you can tell him what his part is. *Adios.*"

True to Link's prediction, Steve Arden pleaded a headache. It was all Dan Belt could do to keep from exposing his knowledge of what was going on. But he told Arden to take the night off. It would be his last night off. Belt wondered what would be the best way to kill Eddie Link off after this was over. Belt had not the slightest intention of ever paying Link for his scheme or his work. But that could wait; the big scheme came first.

Belt obtained the necessary articles, packed them in a big suitcase and announced to the men in the Pay Streak that he was leaving on the night stage. He gave particular orders to each of them, told them he would be back in a week, and made all his preparations for the trip. But before leaving the place he locked his safe and office, putting the keys in his pocket. No one would be allowed in that office during his absence. In the saloon safe was sufficient money to handle the games and the general business. A run of bad luck was unknown to Belt's games; they were not run that way.

Night comes swiftly after sundown in the desert hills. Eddie Link stood in the lights from the stage depot and watched Dan Belt climb into the stage. Several people were grouped around to see him depart—a perfect alibi for the boss of Bonanza City.

Tug Adams was the stage driver, and Link had heard that Adams had no more conscience than a rattlesnake.

Duke Akers came along and shook hands. Belt bade Akers to take good care of the town during his absence. After Akers left the stage he strolled toward the deadline canyon.

Eddie Link watched the stage leave town, then crossed the street. He stopped at the mouth of a narrow alley between the Pay Streak Saloon and a feed store. He remained near the corner for several minutes, standing in the deep shadows until he felt sure he was not observed, then faded silently into the alley.

BUSINESS was brisk at the Pay Streak. Many of the miners from the mines across the deadline were there, and all the games were running. Several of Belt's gunmen were drinking and playing. With the big boss out of the way, they were at liberty to enjoy themselves.

Link came in later, but Belt's men ignored him. He did not drink or gamble. Link looked at the clock on the back bar, noted the time and strolled away. He decided that Belt should be well on his way back to jail by this time; so Link went to meet him.

Link was at the jail when Belt joined

him, and they planted the dynamite. Working as swiftly as possible in the dark, they ran the wires over to the old adobe shack and hooked them to a battery.

Link was obliged to fasten the wires, because Belt was too nervous.

"All right," growled Belt. "I'll handle this now. You get over and finish the rest of the job. You better be damn sure you do it right, or I'll—"

Dan Belt never finished his threat. Something hit him a terrific blow on the head.

A few minutes later Eddie Link again crossed the main street and entered that same alley. He did not come back to the main street; but a little later he was circling the rear of the buildings and hurrying toward the deadline canyon. It was nearly time for his rendezvous with the lanky marshal of Bonanza City.

Fifteen minutes later the residents of the South Side heard the sound of a single shot. Just one shot—no more. Those on the other side of the deadline were too far away to hear it; or if they did hear it they paid no attention.

It was possibly twenty or thirty minutes later when six shots rang out on the night air, plainly heard by the folk of the North Side. People on the street wondered what was the meaning of them.

"Sounded up near the jail," said a man in front of the Pay Streak. "Mebbe Duke's havin' trouble. We better go and see."

As he finished a sheet of flame illuminated the sky and a deafening explosion followed, fairly shaking that side of town.

Men ran into the street, wondering, questioning. A bareheaded man came running down the street, waving his arms frantically.

"They blowed up the jail!" he yelled. "Blowed her up and knocked me down!"

"Who blowed up the jail?" asked a dozen voices.

"I—I never stopped to ask," replied the dazed man, and the crowd ran to find out for themselves.

Down at the concealed stage Tug Adams hunched on the seat, waiting for Dan Belt to return. Belt had told him nothing, except that he would be back in a little while. Tug heard the explosion and wondered what caused it.

There was a chilly wind blowing: so Tug got down and walked around to keep warm. The team was tied in a manzanita thicket, some distance off the road. Tug circled the stage once; and as he came around the second time a figure stepped out from beside the boot at the rear of the stage, slashed downward with a gun barrel, and Tug Adams went to sleep.

"All right, Steve," called the voice of Eddie Link. "You and Nora pile right in and we'll get goin'. We won't stop at Sunrise; so go to sleep, if you want to."

"We owe you a lot, Eddie," said Steve, as he helped Nora into the stage. "What was the explosion about?"

"That wasn't no explosion—that was a receipt," replied Eddie.

The door of the stage slammed shut. The thin faced kid swung the four horses deftly around, and the heavy stage went rocking down toward the road.

Long after midnight the Pay Streak was packed with men from both sides of The Gut. With Jack Sheedy as spokesman, the Miners' Committee was making an investigation. Dan Belt would have greatly resented Jack Sheedy and his men conducting an investigation on that side of town, and especially in the Pay Streak. But Dan Belt was not there to object. Dan Belt had gone away on the stage that evening. Several people were ready to testify to that. But Dan Belt's white Stetson sombrero, torn and powder-burnt, had been found near the ruins of the jail. Someone had been blown to bits in that explosion, but no one knew who it might have been.

STEVE ARDEN and Eddie Link were both missing. Arden's personal belongings were all gone from his room. Jack Sheedy faced the crowd.

"Here's all we know about it, gents," he said. "About eight o'clock this evenin' a shot was fired outside my home. We investigated and found Duke Akers, the

marshal, lying across my front porch. In his right hand was a cocked gun, all six chambers loaded. He had not fired the shot. What he was doing there will probably never be known. Shortly after we discovered him, and while our doctor was making an examination, we heard shots fired over here."

"Six of 'em," interrupted a man. "I counted 'em."

"Six!" affirmed another. "I did too."

"The number doesn't matter." Sheedy smiled. "Immediately after the shots we heard the explosion which blew up our jail. Why the jail was dynamited we do not know. Tug Adams, the stage driver, came back to town, bleeding from a head wound and telling a queer tale of holding the stage out there a mile or so while Dan Belt came back here to see some one. He says he was struck over the head totally unexpected and his stage stolen.

"So much for that part of it. Some of you boys saw our investigation of Belt's office, where we found the safe open. How much money was taken we do not know. You all heard me read the letter we found in Belt's desk—a letter from an outlaw called Turkey Track, who was killed a few days ago near Sunrise. He accuses Belt of murdering Jim Hassler and stealing a prospect, which he sold for twenty thousand dollars."

"What about that paper on his desk?" queried a miner. "The one with the Turkey Track mark on it?"

"Someone trying to impersonate a dead outlaw," replied Sheedy. "Turkey Track was buried in Wrangler the other day. He was identified and the reward is to be paid promptly, I understand."

"The thing to do," said a miner, "is to find Steve Arden and that hatchet faced Eddie Link. It's a cinch that Dan Belt never hit Tug Adams and stole his own stage. Steve was Dan's top-hand dealer, but I don't know what Link was."

Two men came in, shoving their way through the crowd to where Sheedy and his men were standing. They were carrying an exploding battery for firing dynamite blasts, which they placed on the bar.

"We found the busted wires," explained one of the men, "and traced 'em to that old shack west of the jail, where we found the battery. Look what's here on the handle!"

Tied to the handle of the battery was a piece of white cardboard, on which was penciled the mark of the Turkey Track; and attached to the string were two big keys.

"That's the key to the jail!" asserted one of Belt's men. "That biggest one. I've seen Duke Akers foolin' with it lots o' times."

"And that other one is Belt's safe key," declared the bartender. "I know that one well. Somebody jimmied Dan's window—the one on the alley—and opened the safe with Dan's own key!"

"But how in the devil did he get Dan's key?" queried a gambler.

"That's right," nodded the bartender. "Dan was careful of that key. Why, he never left it out of his pocket for a minute."

"And there was Dan's new white hat," added another. "There ain't another hat like that in this country. Dan paid fifty dollars for that hat. And it's a cinch it was in that explosion."

"Well," said the bartender wisely, "there's Dan Belt, Steve Arden and that rat faced kid to be accounted for. And somebody was in the jail when that dynamite busted."

JACK SHEEDY drew out a soiled letter and looked at it again.

It read:

Dan Belt:

The Turkey Track is collecktin. He wants the twenty thousind you got for Jim Hassler's mine and then he's goin to kill you just like you killed Jim.

Yrs respy
—TURKEY TRACK

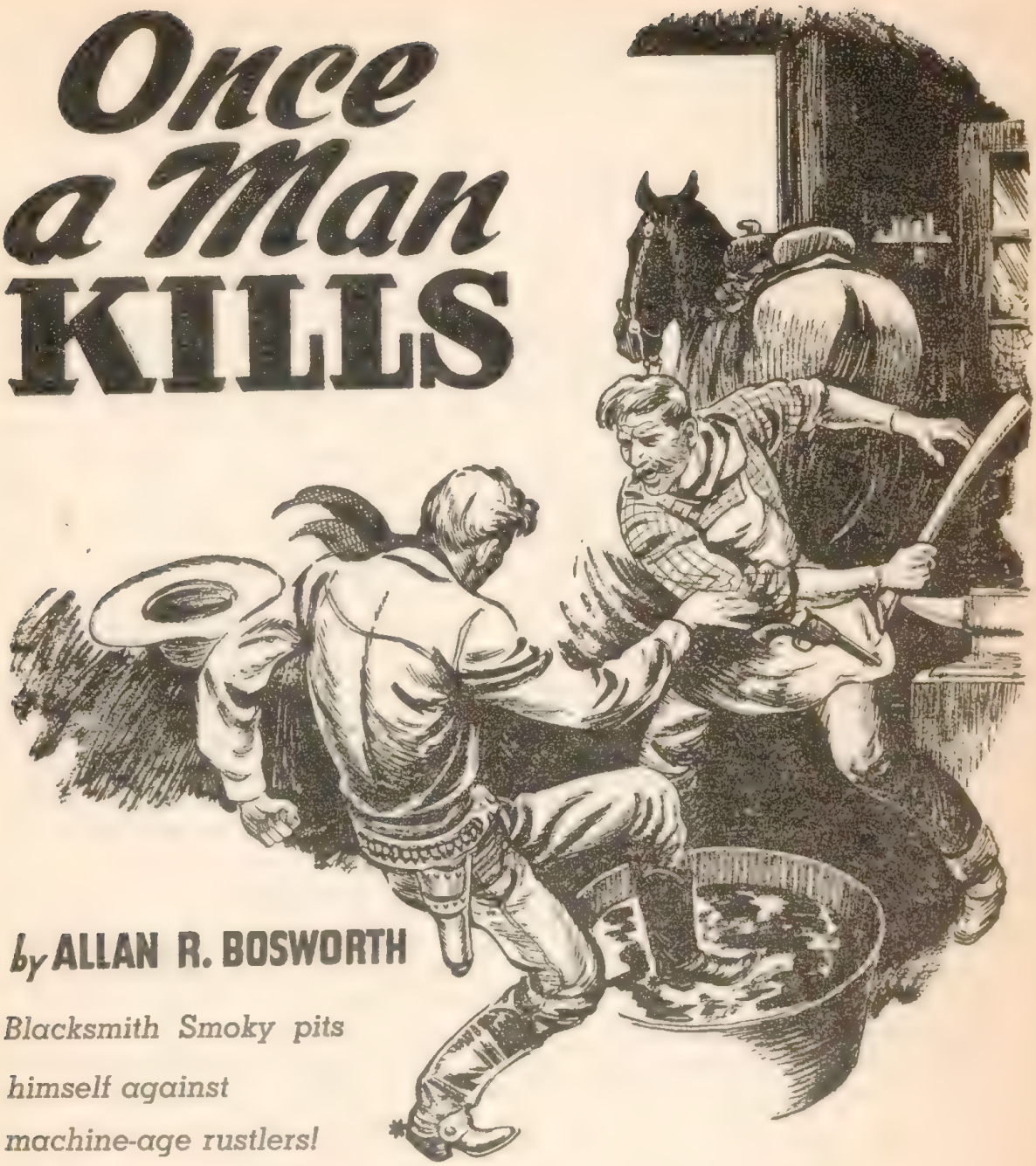
Jack Sheedy drew a deep breath and pocketed the letter.

"I move that we drop this investigation until we hear from Dan Belt," he said.

"Seconded," said one of the committee.

And the investigation was closed.

Once a Man KILLS



by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Blacksmith Smoky pits himself against machine-age rustlers!

NOT many people on the Y Bar ever gave old Smoky Magill a chance to talk about himself. There was a good reason. You know how old-timers are apt to be, mighty long-winded, and so slow of speech it takes them hours to tell about that time they went up the trail with the Jinglebobs, or a Turkey Track herd and nobody cared.

And when old Smoky came to the Y Bar, cattle ranching had long before been changed into a cold, competitive business. Every man had a job to do; nobody had the time to listen to an old, broken-down cowpuncher.

Lon Whittaker was the only one who

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showed any interest at all in Smoky. The first two or three days he was there, Smoky mentioned something about Lincoln County, New Mexico.

Lon said, quicklike: "That was Billy the Kid's range."

Smoky was working on a pair of gallegs spurs, inlaid with Mexican silver. He didn't look up.

"Yep, that's right, son," he drawled, and you could tell he was pleased at having an opening talk. "Why, once I could have shot Billy the Kid. It would have been as easy as falling off that corral fence, yonder. I remember the time like it was yesterday. There he was, and me—"

"Well," Lon interrupted in a jeering tone, "what was holding you back? Why didn't you shoot him?"

Old Smoky looked up then, hurt-like. He studied Lon Whittaker a minute.

Whittaker had buck teeth and yellow hair and a weak kind of chin. You take all that and stack it on a man who's not too big to begin with, and it's not very impressive. Old Smoky acted like he was going to say something, but thought better of it. He started working again.

Lon grinned and walked toward his horse. "You be thinking up a good alibi for not shooting Billy the Kid when you had a chance," he called back over his shoulder. "I got to go, now. I'm riding to Dos Palos to see my girl. But you figure out your alibi, and some Sunday when it's raining, I'll listen to it!"

You still see a few old-timers like Smoky Magill, out where the West is wide. Some of them are prodding pack burros toward mountains farther on; some drift along a strip of sun-scorched road, bent under a bedding roll. It takes money to feed a horse since fences came.

But you take a man like Smoky and put him in a saddle, and he fits there like a glove. His back straightens, and the years fall off. You look at him and think of dust rolling up the Chisholm Trail, and nights when northers flapped the wagon tarp and cowboys squatted around the fire swapping stories that needed time for the telling. New stories, old ones.

Stories about Shanghai Pierce and Jack Potter, and about Sam Bass, and Billy the Kid himself. You remember other cowboys riding around the bed ground, singing:

> I'll sell my saddle, as soon as I can,
> And I won't punch cattle for any
> damn man.

But they never sold their saddles—not the ones like Smoky Magill. They never quit, until the West started changing, and cow ranching turned into a business where an old man didn't fit.

Old Smoky hadn't even given up the day he drifted into the Y Bar and asked Jim Fortune, the foreman, for a job riding. Riding, he said. Jim couldn't help but smile a little as he looked over the old man. Smoky was like an old saddle, himself, brown and thin and scuffed by the years. He had a mustache that bristled when he was riled, and it bristled at what Jim said.

"Why, it looks to me like a bronc would just about shake you apart, old-timer!" Jim told him. "Can you drive a truck?"

"Gosh, no!" Smoky said. "But I know horses. You give me a horse, and I'll show you!"

THE way he said "horses" was slow and warm, as if he were caressing a word he loved. But Jim Fortune laughed.

"We don't use as many riders as we used to, old-timer. There's not a riding job open. Maybe if you're any kind of a blacksmith we could put you on the payroll, though. Our blacksmith went to Dos Palos and opened a garage."

"Shoeing horses?" Smoky asked, caressing the word again.

"Some. And welding busted axles and windmill parts, too."

Smoky tightened his belt, and you could see it had a couple of fresh notches in it. He said, stubbornly: "I can shoe horses."

They kept him busy. He could have told some mighty interesting stories, maybe, but he was on the job all day long, and the others were out riding fence or doctoring wormy stock or doing the hun-

dred and one things that keep a ranch going. There were windmills in the north pasture to be greased and kept in repair, and feed had to be hauled that year because the winter and spring had been dry.

The Y Bar was a big ranch, even as ranches went in the old days. It ran from Dos Palos on the north clear down through forty miles of sunbaked desert on the south to the Mexican line. When you came to that line, the country was the same on the other side; you could ride forty miles and not see so much as a sheep camp.

WHAT old Smoky told Lon Whittaker about Billy the Kid got around. Jim Fortune laughed when he heard it.

"I never seen one of these old-timers who wasn't like that," Jim said. "To hear them tell it, every single one of them old bush dodgers was a *compadre* of Billy the Kid, with Wild Bill and Wyatt Earp throwed in. Why, I know for a fact that a few years ago there were about forty guns for sale in the Southwest—every one of them claimed to be the gun Pat Garrett used when he killed the Kid!"

What Jim was trying to say was that Billy the Kid had become a legend. Maybe it never occurred to him that Smoky Magill was a sort of legend, himself.

You know the way it was about this time. Autos and trucks were just coming into use in the ranch country, and they were changing things in more ways than one. It helped a lot to be able to truck cottonseed cake and alfalfa right out to the range and piece out the grass that was sunburned before it had any real nourishment in it, and it was nice to pull windmill rods with a truck instead of spoiling a good cowhorse by making him walk back and forth all day.

But other people began to use trucks, too. The Y Bar missed twenty head of prime beef steers in one pasture, and eighteen in another, all in one week. Jim Fortune rode out there to have a look at the barbed wire.

The fence was good and tight, although it had been cut between posts. What was even more significant, Jim found strange tire marks in an alkali flat.

"The tracks headed for Mexico," he said, when he came back and began cleaning his old .45. "You know what that means. It's the lowest form of rustling when a man runs stock into Mexico!"

Everybody understood. Cattle driven south the line had to be sold individually for beef, because the Mexicans had no packeries, and not even any refrigeration. That prime beef was being jerked, or used for tamales, and it would be wasted.

Old Smoky Magill wiped smoke off his leathery face and said, "I mind the time King Fisher used to do just the opposite of what you'd expect, like that. Now, everybody else was rustling Texas cattle and runnin' 'em into Mexico. But not Fisher. He run Mexican cattle into Texas —some of the orneriest looking critters you ever seen. Not worth a dollar a head. King Fisher killed eight Mexicans and strung their ears on his bridle reins. Seems like he was just against Mexicans in general."

Nobody paid any attention to Smoky. Jim Fortune said, "Well, I reckon Bud Sears would know those tire marks, if anybody would! I'm going to bring Bud down here and let him take a look."

Bud Sears was the garage man in Dos Palos who had held down the Y Bar blacksmith job before old Smoky came, and he was glad enough to try to help. When he saw the tracks, he frowned.

"Half the automobiles in this country wear them kind of tires," he told Jim. "I've sold more'n a dozen sets since I opened that garage, myself."

"Who bought 'em?" Jim persisted. "I mean, who in the bunch might be low enough to turn rustler?"

"Anybody might lift a few cows in times like these," Bud said grimly. "There was the Mashed O, and Solly Henderson, and Joe Lindner. And the Hernandez boys, and Pete McIntyre. And—"

"The Hernandez boys?" Jim interrupted. He looked at Lon Whittaker. Whittaker's girl was Josefina Hernandez, a sultry-eyed little *cholo* who looked like

she might kiss a man one minute and stab him to death the next.

Lon Whittaker flushed clear up to his yellow hair. "You're loco if you think they'd do anything like that!" he protested. "Jose and Rafael make good money hauling wood in that truck."

"Wood's scarce, too," Jim Fortune retorted. "Lon, you keep your eyes and ears open. I ain't saying it's them. But they run around with all the young Mexicans who think they're *muy malo*—and truck rustling would be about the style of that bunch."

"I ain't spying on my girl's brothers!" Lon growled.

Jim Fortune just shrugged. The Y Bar started night riding for the first time since the range was put under wire. After a couple of weeks nothing had happened, and it didn't seem like there was any use keeping it up. Besides, the work was piling up so much that a short day time crew couldn't handle it.

Things had settled back to normal the Sunday night Lon Whittaker rode the twenty miles to Dos Palos to see Josefina —and wasn't back at the ranch next morning when the hands saddled up for a roundup in the northwest pasture.

Old Smoky was pumping his forge, heating a piece of strap steel to make the business end of a Y Bar branding iron. The truck rolled into the yard outside the shed, and he didn't pay any attention, thinking the windmill man had come back for some of his tools. Shadows fell across the bright doorway, and somebody said; "All right, *viejo!* Come outside—we got a job for you!"

Smoky Magill looked up and saw the guns as he straightened, and the eyes of the Mexicans were more dangerous than the muzzles of the revolvers. The eyes of Jose and Rafael were glittering and deadly and cold, like a rattler's.

SMOKY knew then that things had gone beyond the rustling of a few cattle in a truck. Something had happened in Dos Palos.

Jose's gun jerked menacingly, *"Andale!"* he ordered. "There is a loose shackle on the rear spring, and the leaves have spread. We have no tools. Crawl under this truck and fix her. Quick, or we shoot you and do it ourselves!"

Old Smoky came blinking into the sunlight, wrench and sledge in hand while he wondered what chance he stood if he tried using them for weapons. But there were two other Mexicans in the truck, and they had guns, too.

All of them, Smoky could see, had either been drinking *tequila* or smoking marijuana. "Never seen anybody who was in a hurry to hit Mexico worry about a spread spring!" he grumbled as he crawled under the axle.

Rafael laughed. "But that is not all, *amigo*! You see. Come on, Tomas! We find what is in the kitchen while Jose sees that the work is done. Enrique, you put water in the radiator, eh?"

Smoky Magill went to work with the gun on him. He loosened the shackles further, jacked up the truck bed, and hammered the leaves of the spring back into place.

All the time he was wondering what had become of Lon Whittaker.

He put this worry into words. "What happened, Jose? You killed Lon, maybe? You fought over your sister, eh?"

But Jose's white teeth flashed in merriment. "Me killed Lon? You are *muy loco, viejo!* You will see. No, it was the cashier at the bank we killed." And Jose's saddle-brown face twisted into a snarl. "The cashier was a fool! He tried to stop us."

"I reckon that was plumb foolish, at that," Smoky Magill said mildly. "Man ought to use his head before he tried to use his gun. Now, you take Billy the Kid—"

"Don't talk so much!" Jose warned. "You fix that spring. There are rough roads where we will go, and there will be people after us."

Others came with grub from the Y Bar's kitchen—*frijoles,* coffee and sugar, bacon and canned goods and flour. Enough to last them for weeks down there

across the Border. Smoky Magill knew what had happened, now, and that there would be people after the Hernandez gang, indeed. But a truck could go about as fast over the ranch roads as any other machine, and apparently the robbers figured they had enough head start to make the Border.

Old Smoky gave a last good bang with his hammer, and tightened the shackle bolts. Jose bent to inspect the job. It was a good one. "All right, *viejo!*" he said. "We go, now. You are lucky we did not have to kill you. *Adios!*"

The truck turned out of the yard and roared southward into the desert. There was a white cloud of dust behind it and for miles Smoky Magill could watch.

"If I only had me a horse," he said. "They ain't making better time than a horse could make over the short cuts."

But nobody had left a horse in the corral that morning. Old Smoky went back into the small dimness of the shop.

He didn't hear his next visitor nearly an hour later, and didn't know Lon Whittaker had arrived until the slight, buck-toothed youth loomed in the doorway leading a limping sorrel horse. There was a gun in Whittaker's hand, too.

"They come by here," Whittaker said. "I seen the tracks. How long ago?"

"Hour, maybe," Smoky said. He looked at the gun curiously. It meant that Lon wasn't against the Hernandez boys—he was *with* them. Otherwise, there would have been no call for holding a gun on Smoky Magill.

"You shoot that bank cashier, Lon?"

Whittaker's eyes narrowed. "No! It was—one of the others. But I was there, and I got to ride south! You put a new shoe on this off hind leg, and do it quick. Before somebody comes!"

Smoky nodded, and began pumping the forge while he studied Lon Whittaker.

There was sweat and black soot smeared on his leathery old face, and a strange expression in his faded eyes. He was looking back down the years—seeing another slight, weak-chinned youth with yellow hair and buck teeth.

Lon Whittaker growled. "Well, what are you staring at? Sure, I throwed in with them! What of it? What do you get pounding saddle leather at fifty bucks a month?"

"Yeah, I know," said Smoky. "I'm glad you wasn't the one who killed the cashier, though. You know, Lon, once a man kills, he can't stop—unless the law kills him. He keeps on."

Whittaker laughed harshly. Old Smoky found a shoe and walked over to examine the sorrel's tender frog.

"What I'm wondering," Smoky said, "is why you wasn't with them in the truck? Wasn't it faster, that way?"

"Leave my horse?" Lon Whittaker asked simply. "I couldn't do that. I had him staked out of town. If he hadn't throwed this shoe—"

Smoky Magill nodded. "That's right, Lon. A man don't leave his horse no more than he'd sell his saddle." He looked intently at Whittaker again. "You know, for a minute, you looked mighty like Billy the Kid. I was this close to him once, Lon. I could have shot him."

LON WHITTAKER laughed. "But I reckon you didn't for the same reason you can't shoot me now! You didn't have a gun. So I look like Billy the Kid, eh?" He rolled a cigarette with his left hand, and closed the tobacco sack with the string in his prominent teeth. "Well, why not? I always liked Billy the Kid, and I think he got a raw deal. Maybe when I'm down in Mexico, I'll change my name to *El Chivarro!* Maybe I'll be another Billy the Kid. Why not?"

Smoky was shaping his shoe. He said, "I never noticed before. But you look like him. He even wore his pants that way, tucked inside his boots. He killed a soldier who was teasing him, and after that he killed twenty other men before they got him. It's like that. A killer can't stop. But a man can't do that today, Lon. The law moves quicker."

"That's a my lookout," Whittaker said.

"That's a mighty good horse you've got," Smoky went on. "You know, if he

goes lame and plays out in the desert, it'll be tough."

"I'll risk that! He won't go lame if you do a good job on that shoe. I'm no blacksmith, but you can't fool me with a bum job. You do it right, or I'll kill my first man right here!"

Smoky shook his head. "I'll do it right, Lon. You don't think I'd lame any horse thataway, do you?"

He cut a small hunk of bar steel for the first toe. Whittaker stepped to the door to listen and look outside, but there was no one coming yet. When he came back, Smoky said: "I never noticed before. You even got eyes like him. What happened, Lon? I mean, why didn't the Hernandez boys stick to truck rustling?"

"That's their business," Whittaker said.

"It's like killing," Smoky answered his own question. "You start something, you got to go even farther. I reckon you've read a lot about Billy the Kid, haven't you? I reckon he's sort of a hero to you."

"He got a raw deal," Whittaker said. "And he had nerve and leadership, didn't he? You didn't. You were going to tell me, some day, why you didn't shoot him. Didn't you have a gun?"

"Sure," Smoky said. He cut the red-hot bar steel for the other toe. "You see, Lon, he was sort of my hero, too. I wasn't but sixteen. It was right after the Kid killed Bob Ollinger and hobbled out of the Lincoln County courthouse with the shackles still on his legs. I was as close as from here to that door. But I thought he was a hero, too.

"He wasn't, Lon. He was just a cold-blooded murderer, twenty times over. He started killing and couldn't stop."

"You were scared," Whittaker scoffed.

Smoky lifted the glowing bit of toe metal with his tongs. They slipped, and the chunk of steel fell to the ground.

"Guess I am a mite nervous," Smoky muttered. He stooped with the tongs, and lifted the glowing chunk.

Then he gave the tongs a dexterous flip that sent the red hot piece of steel down the inside of Lon Whittaker's boot.

The man who looked like Billy the Kid jumped, doubling and howling with pain. He turned toward the slack tub, and just as he thrust his foot into the black water, Smoky Magill moved fast.

Smoky snatched up an ax handle that leaned against the wall, and knocked the gun out of Whittaker's hand.

"I hated to do that, Lon," Smoky said gently. "But I reckon it was the only way. Get that boot off and we'll put some axle grease on the burn."

"You—you old—"

"Calling names won't help none. You listen to me, Lon. They'd have caught up with you in the long run. It's better to take your medicine just as a bank robber. You're young, and there's plenty of time to start over."

Whittaker moaned wordlessly, sitting down on the floor to remove the soaked boot and Smoky Magill handed him the can of axle grease. There was the sound of an automobile on the Dos Palos road.

"I reckon that's the sheriff and a posse," Smoky Magill said. "The law moves faster'n it used to. I reckon they won't have no trouble rounding up the Hernandez boys and the others. They'll find 'em down the desert maybe twenty miles."

"Heck, no!" said Whittaker. "They will be across the Line before anybody gets there. I could have been hiding in the hills, too. I could have made it."

Smoky patted the sorrel with his left hand. "You know why I done what I done, Lon?" he asked softly. "Because maybe you look like Billy the Kid, but you ain't really bad. No man who thinks enough of his horse is real bad—and you like this horse."

The sheriff's car was pulling into the yard. Lon Whittaker said, sullenly: "They won't get Jose and Rafael. They'll be over the border!"

"I reckon not, Lon," old Smoky Magill chuckled. "I fixed a busted spring for them, you see. And while I was under the truck with that hammer, I drove a couple of nail holes in the bottom of their gas tank. I reckon all the posse will have to do is go down the desert a piece and round 'em up!"

FIVE MEN and a RANCH

By DANE ZALE

LANCE MOORE halted his white faced bay and sat in the saddle gazing somberly at the buzzards circling low in the sky off to the south. It was hot here on the edge of the desert. The sun burned into Moore's broad back through the cloth of the heavy flannel shirt he wore. The leather chaps of a brush country man were heavy against the levis he wore beneath them.

"Buzzards," he muttered. "Flying low and waiting—and when they do that they are usually waiting for something or someone to die."

The bay snorted. Apparently he didn't consider the words of the young husky cowboy in the saddle very cheerful. Moore was inclined to agree with the horse. From the first this returning to the old S Bar H hadn't been what could be called a pleasant journey. Coming back to a ranch you hated because a dying man had written and asked you to do so wasn't Lance Moore's idea of a good time.

Moore had been working on a spread in New Mexico when old Scott Hickey's letter had finally reached him. Hickey was the owner of the S Bar H and Moore had been a member of the outfit four years ago. The ranch owner believed firmly in all work and no play as far as the cowboys in his outfit were concerned. An idea with which his waddies disagreed heartily.

"The Old Man hates to see a feller stop to take a drink of water when the waddy could be working," Art Gilbert said one day. "If you ask me, Scott Hickey is not my idea of nice people."

Unfortunately Gilbert's voice had been loud and the owner of the S Bar H had heard the big redhead express his opinion. If there was one thing Hickey couldn't stand it was criticism of any sort from his men.

"I heard you, Gilbert," Hickey said, stepping into the bunkhouse. "And I don't need anyone in this outfit telling me how to run my ranch. You're fired!"

Art Gilbert left the next morning. Moore had been sorry to see the redhead go for they got along well together. It hadn't been more than a month later

Scott Hickey was one mean hombre to work for, but he knew that a top-hand would back him in a pinch!

that Hickey had fired Moore, claiming that the waddy was shirking his work. Moore knew that he had been doing as much work as any other member of the outfit. Probably he had been doing more, but he didn't bother to argue about it. He took his pay and departed.

Now four years later he had received the letter from Scott Hickey. It was a pitiful sort of epistle the old man had written. Moore knew every word of it by heart—and he carried it in a pocket of his levis. The letter read:

Dear Lance Moore:

I'm writing you to ask you to do an old man a favor—and I realize that I have plenty of nerve in doing this. The doctor tells me that with my bad heart I haven't much longer to live—and I believe him. Such being the case I aim to try and get my affairs in shape, pronto.

As you know I never married and have no close kin, and with all the years I have spent building up the spread I sure would hate to have the old S Bar H get into the hands of strangers. My will names you as part owner of the ranch and so I am asking you to come back here and help make sure everything is running as it should be so that I can die in peace. I'm sorry I fired you —must have been something wrong with my head. Never had a better man working for me than you. Hope you will be able to do like I ask.

Yours truly,

Scott Hickey

That was the letter that sent Lance Moore heading back to the S Bar H. He was human and always had wanted a ranch of his own, but just never had done anything about getting one—though he had saved a little money from time to time. The part of the letter in which Hickey mentioned having made Moore part owner of the S Bar H in the old man's will interested the cowboy. He wanted to know more about that. Besides he felt strangely sorry for his former boss.

Another impatient snort from the bay, who didn't see much point in just standing there in the hot sun, brought Lance Moore abruptly back to the present. He frowned as he saw the buzzards were circling even lower now and the birds were not far away.

"Reckon we better ride over that way and see what those buzzards are so excited about, Buck," Moore told the horse. "Let's go."

He rode south and topped a low rise. On the other side of the hill Moore discovered what had attracted the buzzards. A man dressed in range clothes was lying on his back on the ground and he was very still.

Moore rode closer and then dismounted and came forward, leading the bay by the reins. The waddy's chaps rustled and the leather of his crossed gunbelts creaked as he moved.

"Art Gilbert!" Moore exclaimed as he recognized the redheaded man lying there. "Poor feller." Moore took off his hat in respect for the dead and held it in his left hand along with the reins. "Wonder who downed him?"

He was puzzled, for he could see no sign of the bullet wound that he was sure must have killed Gilbert.

"Wonder if he had any folks I could notify after I bury him?" Moore said.

"Would you mind not holding the funeral until after I'm dead," Gilbert said weakly. "You're worse than them buzzards."

Moore uttered a startled gasp and dropped Buck's reins, leaving the bay standing ground-hitched. Then Moore put on his hat and knelt beside the man on the ground.

"Art," he said. "It is Lance Moore who used to work with you on the S Bar H, remember?"

"Sure I remember," Gilbert said weakly, his eyes staring at the other man. "Glad to see you again, Lance."

"What happened?" Moore demanded. "Who shot you and left you lying here like this, Art?"

"Nobody shot me," Gilbert said. "My horse threw me. Guess I landed on my head and was knocked unconscious. Don't know how long I have been lying here. When I opened my eyes a few moments ago I saw the buzzards circling around and then heard your voice talking about me being dead." The redhead smiled faintly as he sat up. "Sure gave me quite a turn."

The buzzards decided there was nothing here for them and flew away to disappear in the blue. Moore helped Gilbert to his feet and they went over and sat in the shade of a big mesquite bush where they could talk.

"What are you doing in this part of the country, Art?" Moore asked. "Don't tell me that you are heading back to the S Bar H?"

"I am aiming to do just that," Gilbert said. "I got a letter from Hickey saying he is dying and he was sorry he fired me—"

"Wait a moment!" Moore interrupted. "Don't tell me that he said he was leaving you the ranch in his will?"

"He sure did," said Gilbert in surprise. "How did you know?"

"That's why I'm here," Moore said drawing his letter from Hickey out of his pocket. "He wrote me, too. Let's see your letter, Art."

They compared the two letters. Save for the different names at the start Scott Hickey had written them exactly the same thing, even to the mention of being part owner of the ranch in his will.

"Howdy, partner," Gilbert said dryly. "I got a funny feeling about this business now, Lance. I left a good job in Arizona to come back here, and somehow I don't feel half as sorry for Scott Hickey as I did before we compared those letters."

"Me neither," Moore said, getting to his feet. "I'll ride around and see if I can find your horse. Don't reckon he drifted far away."

Moore found the riderless roan half a mile away, his reins tangled in some brush. Moore led the horse back and found that Gilbert was feeling much better and able to ride. After all he had only been knocked out and sustained no other serious injuries. Gilbert swung into the saddle and they headed for the S Bar H.

WHEN they reached the ranch they discovered Scott Hickey sitting on the porch of the ranchhouse with two other men. Moore and Gilbert halted their mounts at the hitching rail near the steps of the porch.

"Moore and Gilbert!" Hickey called to them without rising from his chair. "Sure is good to see you both. Light and rest your saddles."

"That's not the way he talked last time I saw him," Moore said in an undertone to Gilbert as they dismounted and tied the bay and the roan to the rail. "Times sure do change. Ever see those two hombres with Hickey before, Art?"

"No," said Gilbert softly. "Have you?"

"Never," said Moore.

They went up to the steps of the porch. One of the strangers was thin faced and wore a black moustache—the other man was stout, but he didn't look jolly. They both wore range clothes and guns.

"Meet a couple of men I have working for me," Hickey said. He nodded to the man with the mustache. "This is Roscoe McKenzie, and the other man is Jeff Lang."

McKenzie and Lang just nodded without speaking. Moore decided he didn't like either man. They looked more like gunmen than cowboys to him, and he was a pretty good judge of character.

"Now that you boys are here you might as well start right in helping get things running smoothly," Hickey said. "McKenzie and Lang are all the men I've got working for me now and they need some help."

"Let's not be too hasty about this," Moore said dryly. "You mean that Gilbert and I are to start working again

for the S Bar H as cowhands at the usual pay."

"Well, not exactly," Hickey said slowly. "You see all my money is tied up right now. I figured that you two would take pity on a dying old man, and help out for a while free of charge."

"Unhuh," said Gilbert. "And that way we keep on working for you for nothing—and you might live to be a hundred and ten."

"No cowboys in this part of the country except us will work on this ranch," McKenzie said quietly. "Even for good wages. Claim that Hickey here is too hard to get along with."

"Seems I've heard that last part before," Moore said. "Hickey being a hard man to get along with sure sounds familiar."

"But he writes a nice letter," said Gilbert, and then the redhead grinned. "All right, Hickey. I'll work for you for awhile free for nothing just to see what happens next."

"So will I," said Moore, reaching a quick decision. "Might be interesting." He looked at the old ranch owner. "But since you aren't paying us any wages, Boss—remember you can't fire us—no matter what."

He glanced at Lang and McKenzie and decided they must be rotten poker players. The disappointment on their faces was quite plain.

"Good!" said Hickey in a tone of relief. "That suits me fine." He looked at the two gunmen. "Roscoe, you and Jeff run along now—I want to talk to Gilbert and Moore alone."

"We'll stick around, Boss," McKenzie said. "Have to keep close watch on you, you know. The doctor said you weren't to do to much talking—wasn't good for your heart."

"But Scott is feeling much better this morning." Moore abruptly covered Lang and McKenzie with his guns. "So you two are taking a walk so the boss can talk to us like he said."

[*Turn page*]

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"That's right," Gilbert said, his hand on his gun-butt. "Get going."

McKENZIE cursed under his breath, but he didn't like the look on the faces of Moore and Gilbert so he hurried down the steps with Lang following him. They were in sight of the three men on the porch as they walked down toward the bunkhouse.

"This is what I have been waiting for all of the time," Hickey said with a sigh of relief. "Those men have taken over here. Hired them six months ago when I was short of men. My heart really is bad and I can't move around much any more. I found that McKenzie was a top-hand so I made the mistake of making him my foreman."

"Then what?" Moore asked as he slid his guns back into the holsters and dropped into a chair. Gilbert took another chair. "Go on, Boss."

"McKenzie fired all the rest of the outfit except Lang, claiming he was acting under my orders." The ranch owner smiled faintly. "I kind of have a reputation for firing men without much reason. I didn't even know about it until all the men had left."

"What do McKenzie and Lang hope to gain?" Moore asked.

"The S Bar H," said Hickey. "They've been trying to get me to make a new will leaving the spread to them. I found I could get none of the waddies around here to work for me—McKenzie and Lang drove them off. So I thought of the two best cowhands I ever had working for me and wrote you two those letters asking you to come back here to help me. Those two hombres knew about the letters, and they made me promise that if you two showed up I would ask you to work for nothing."

"Hoping we would think you were playing a trick on us so you could get us to work here without wages," said Moore. "And we would just laugh at you and leave."

"That's right." Hickey nodded. "But I meant what I said in those letters. My

will does name you two as part owners of the S Bar H if I should die. Like I said in the letters, I sure would hate to have this ranch get into the hands of strangers."

The ranch owner slowly rose to his feet, and from the way he moved Lance Moore realized Scott Hickey really was a sick man.

From the bunkhouse door the crack of a rifle was a whiplike sound in a little moment of silence. Hickey pitched forward on his face as a bullet plowed through his back and into his heart. Then the owner of the S Bar H sprawled face downward on the porch and remained there motionless.

The rifle roared again and Gilbert went down. Moore fired a wild shot from his right hand gun in the direction of the bunkhouse and then he, too, dropped as the third shot came from the rifle. Three motionless figures sprawled there on the porch of the ranchhouse.

Ten minutes later McKenzie and Lang cautiously approached the porch. McKenzie carried a rifle.

"I guess you know what you are doing, Mac," Lang said as they reached the porch and stared at the three still figures. "But I still don't see why you downed the Old Man. How are we going to get him to make a new will leaving us this ranch when he is dead?"

"Don't need a will," said McKenzie. "We'll make out a bill of sale giving us the ranch and sign Hickey's name to it.

[*Turn page*]

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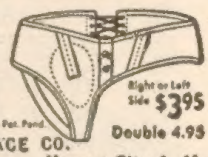

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I been practising copying his signature and I'm right good at it."

"How are you going to explain this business of three men being dead?" Lang asked.

"Easy. Moore and Gilbert killed the old man to get the ranch," McKenzie said. "Since he wrote them telling them they were part owners of the spread. Then they got fighting over the ranch and killed each other off. Course we'll say the letters were just fakes so Hickey could get Moore and Gilbert to work for him—and find and get rid of the will."

"But it won't work!" Moore sat up abruptly, his gun still in his right hand.

McKenzie uttered a startled shout and raised the rifle. Moore shot him in the chest before he could get the Winchester to his shoulder. At the same time Lang drew his gun and aimed it at Moore. Gilbert came alive with gun roaring before Lang could fire. Lang dropped—a bullet in his heart.

"Get me to a doctor," McKenzie gasped. "I'm dying—I'll admit everything."

"Looks like this might be the doctor coming to see Hickey now," said Moore, glancing at a horse and buggy that was heading toward the ranch, a gray bearded man handling the reins. "And when he gets here you can start talking, McKenzie."

"Nothing much more I can do for him," Doctor Brown said, gazing at McKenzie. "Ironical that he should have killed Scott Hickey. Why I didn't think Hickey would live more than a few weeks more at the most." The old doctor smiled at Moore and Gilbert. "Looks like you two got here just in time."

"We sure did, partner," Moore grinned at the redhead.

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A FRANK STATEMENT ON A "DELICATE" SUBJECT: CONSTIPATION

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The pace of modern living is blamed for many things. And those who blame it are often right.

Our lives have become so filled with daily problems, it is no wonder we long for the days of the caveman, who ate his food raw, and "got plenty of roughage" in his diet.

Doctors know that the digestive system is strongly influenced by proper food, regularity and rest. They say: (a) Eat a balanced diet at regular hours; (b) Drink plenty of water daily; (c) Get at least 8 hours' sleep; (d) Take regular exercise; (e) Always obey the urge to eliminate waste; (f) Don't worry over problems you cannot immediately solve.

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Actually, there are several types of constipation. Two basic types are common:

1. The organic type, requiring medical care.
2. The "functional" type, requiring wise mechanical correction.

The second type, in which the intestines fail to do their work properly, can often be justly blamed on the nerve-wracking life we lead.

The end of each day leaves us so tense, so nervously exhausted, that every muscle feels tight—***INCLUDING THE INTESTINAL MUSCLES. IN FACT, IT HAS BEEN SAID, THE WHOLE HUMAN DIGESTIVE SYSTEM CAN BE ALMOST LITERALLY "TIED IN A KNOT" BY SHEER NERVOUS TENSION.***

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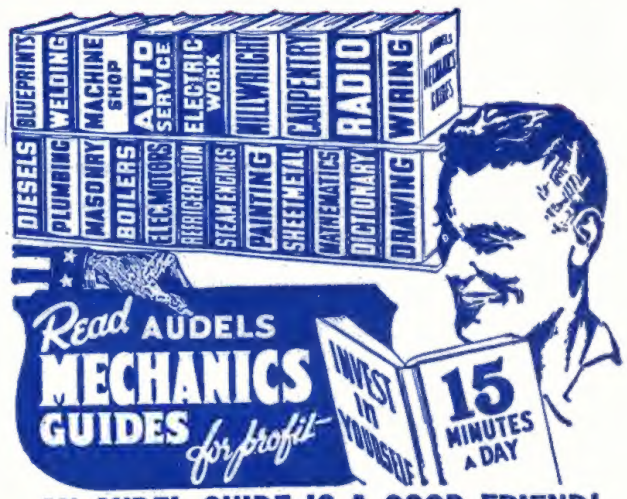

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